

Combining vision with voice

A learning and implementation structure promoting teachers' internalization of practices based on self-determination theory

AVI ASSOR, HAYA KAPLAN, OFRA FEINBERG
AND KAREN TAL
Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

ABSTRACT

We propose that self-determination theory's conceptualization of internalization may help school reformers overcome the recurrent problem of 'the predictable failure of educational reform' (Sarason, 1993). Accordingly, we present a detailed learning and implementation structure to promote teachers' internalization and application of ideas and practices based on self-determination theory. Finally, we discuss findings from two studies that (1) demonstrate the usefulness of the proposed structure in promoting educational reform, and (2) highlight the components of this structure that teachers report to be valuable.

KEYWORDS *educational reform, internalization, resistance to change, self-determination theory, teachers' development, teachers' motivation*

RESEARCHERS HAVE OFTEN NOTED THAT MANY SCHOOLS do not provide sufficient support for students' development and well-being (Cohen, 2006; Weissberg, 2000). Although the need for school reform programs supporting students' growth is urgent, the difficulty of successful application of such programs is also clear. For example, Sarason (1982) noted that, 'the more schools change the more they stay the same' (p. 58). One important reason for the failure of many reform efforts is insufficient attention to the complex and difficult internalization process that teachers must undergo to fully identify

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with the new ideas promoted by external change agents. Also, teachers' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness may be threatened by external change agents.¹ For example, Hargreaves (1994) noted that, as external change agents promote new visions, they often fail to allow teachers' authentic voices to be heard.

One theory that addresses the process of internalization and considers the support of autonomy and other psychological needs as essential to this process is self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Therefore, SDT may be particularly useful in guiding educational reforms that seek to promote deep internalization and high-quality application of new humanistic ideas and practices in schools. That is, SDT may help educators design reforms that *promote new visions without suppressing teachers' voices*. Such reforms would combine visions coming from sources outside of the school with teachers' voices to develop powerful growth-promoting change processes in schools.

Considering the potential importance of SDT's conceptualization of internalization for educational reform, the purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to present a learning and implementation structure that supports internalization and application of new humanist ideas and practices in schools, and (2) to present results demonstrating the utility of the proposed structure in promoting educational change.

SDT'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INTERNALIZATION AS APPLIED TO TEACHERS' RESPONSE TO EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

Herein, we apply SDT's conceptualization of internalization to identify four distinct motivational responses that teachers may have to new ideas introduced by external change agents: amotivation and resistance, external motivation, introjected internalization, and autonomous internalization. First, teachers may be amotivated and resistant, whereby they do not learn or apply new ideas, or act in ways contrary to those ideas. Second, teachers may be externally motivated, whereby they learn or apply new ideas as a means to obtain a reward or to avoid a punishment. For example, teachers participate in in-service meetings to earn credits that would increase their salary, or to secure a more positive treatment of their requests by the principal. Third, teachers may respond in an introjected way, whereby they learn or apply new ideas to avoid feelings of shame or guilt, or to feel pride and self-worth, rather than because they view those ideas as valuable. Finally, deep and autonomous internalization occurs only when the adoption of the new ideas is based

on true understanding of their merit and the new ideas are perceived as reflecting teachers' authentic identity and values. According to SDT, deep and autonomous internalization is thought to occur to the extent that people experience support for the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Therefore, high-quality (i.e. autonomous) internalization and enactment of new ideas is likely to occur only when the change process includes a learning and application structure which helps teachers to perceive the new ideas not only as non-threatening to their basic needs, but also as supportive of these needs (Assor et al., 2000; Alfi et al., 2004; Roth et al., 2007).

A LEARNING AND IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURE TO
PROMOTE TEACHERS' INTERNALIZATION OF NEW
IDEAS AND PRACTICES

This structure is guided by two basic principles:

- (a) *Creating organizational supports for teachers' need satisfaction during the change process.* This involves continual work with the principal and school administration to create vision, expectations, moral support, and resources that help teachers feel that their learning and application of new ideas and practices do not threaten their basic psychological needs.
- (b) *Learning groups and an implementation structure that help teachers experience the new ideas and practices as need supportive and, therefore, valuable.* In the groups, teachers go through experiences that help them realize the importance of the three needs and of autonomous motivation for their own functioning, for achieving better contact with their students, and for enhancing caring and learning in classrooms.

The structure, which is based on these two principles, includes three organizational components:

- 1 *Small teachers' groups that support on-going learning and application:* groups of 10 to 12 teachers who meet every 2–3 weeks throughout the year and are led by trained facilitators.
- 2 *Continual support for teachers' implementation efforts from the principal.*
- 3 *Meetings of the principal, group facilitators and external change agents to help create a proactive, focused, and reflective approach to the change process:* this occurs every 2–3 weeks.

Because of space limitations, in this article we focus mainly on work in the small teacher groups.

1 *The small teachers' groups*

This group work consists of four phases.

Phase A: Motivational-cognitive Foundation I – basic needs: Phase A has two aims: (1) to help teachers feel that the intervention would not threaten their basic psychological needs and that they are invited to become true partners in the change process, and (2) to teach the concepts of the basic psychological needs and the importance of those needs for learning, well-being, and caring for others, using the teachers' experiences in the group. This phase includes three components:

- (A1) *Teachers learn about basic psychological needs and establish explicit group norms supporting those needs.* During the first meeting, teachers receive a brief explanation of each of the needs and are invited to formulate group norms allowing them to feel related and safe, competent, and autonomous. The facilitator helps teachers to realize how the various norms help support the three needs. Although SDT does not refer to safety as a separate need, we found the strivings for safety to be very meaningful for teachers. The term safety refers to the importance of tenure, financial matters, physical work conditions, non-vindictive treatment of various issues teachers discuss with the principal, etc.
- (A2) *The facilitator encourages open expression of doubts and criticism concerning the group work or the change program more generally.*
- (A3) *Teachers give need-related feedback at the end of each session.* At the end of each meeting, each participant discusses how he/she felt in the group, the impact of the day's process on his/her needs, and whether there are ways in which he/she would like the group or the facilitator function to be changed in the future.

Components A2 and A3 are repeated each meeting. Component A1 is addressed only when relevant.

Phase B: Motivational-cognitive Foundation II – autonomous versus controlled motivation: Phase B has two aims: (1) to facilitate teachers' understanding that growth in students and teachers only occurs from autonomous self-regulation, which is founded on support for the basic psychological needs, and (2) to create an experience which would motivate participants to discuss their own motivation for participating in the group.

In this phase, the various motivations (i.e. amotivation, external, etc.) are exemplified in relation to both academic activities and caring, using actual scales; then there is a discussion of the personal implications for the participants.

At this point, teachers almost invariably talk about their motivation to learn and apply the new ideas, and it often leads to the articulation of doubts and criticisms regarding the new directions that the school administration is taking and sometimes also to a discussion of the value of the small groups. The opportunity to express criticism in an open and safe environment allows members to feel less coerced and to engage the learning and application processes with an experience of choice. Group members often must decide how to proceed, given their doubts and (at times) anger. The discussion also enhances the group's cohesion and experience of autonomy, as the decision of how to proceed is made by the group, rather than the facilitator, and the group members are responsible for carrying out the decisions. This phase is critical for group development and the facilitation of autonomous self-regulation to learn and apply the new ideas.

Phase C: Learning and implementation of five classroom features that minimize need frustration: Phase C has one aim: to translate the concept of supports for the basic psychological needs into a practical structure that teachers can learn and apply successfully in the classroom, so that they can experience how such supports contribute to better learning and more caring in the classroom. The five need-supporting classroom features are as follows:

- (C1) A voice and a role for each student
- (C2) Limiting violence (physical and verbal)
- (C3) Mastery of basic academic skills
- (C4) A caring figure for each student (peer and teacher)
- (C5) Minimizing competition as a means of promoting achievement and discipline

For each feature, teachers learn and discuss (1) the needs that the feature is likely to support, and (2) a brief review of teaching and classroom practices and structures that can promote or undermine the feature. The main focus is on understanding the importance of the five features for supporting students' basic psychological needs, their autonomous self-regulation for caring and learning, and positive student-teacher relations. The basic assumption is that understanding and experiencing the effect of the five features on the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs and autonomous self-regulation would promote teachers' adopting and further developing the relevant practices. In order for teachers to continue implementing the five features, it is critical to create an implementation structure that is not too work intensive, becomes part of the schedule, and receives continual moral and instrumental support from the principal. The structure we have found to be useful includes the following components:

- (1) Teachers carry out a critical review of a brief questionnaire assessing the five classroom features. In this review, teachers revise the questionnaire, which enhances their understanding of the features and their sense of partnership and identification with the new ideas.
- (2) Teachers administer the questionnaire twice a year, analyze it, and use the findings in a conversation that they conduct with each student once per month. In this conversation they refer to the five features (when appropriate) and additional issues the student is concerned about.
- (3) In the groups, teachers have considerable training in empathic-listening and conflict-management skills. Teachers conduct the individual conversations with the students only after the training, which is presented as an opportunity for professional development.

Phase D: Sharing influence and responsibility with students: Phase D has one aim: to share influence and responsibility with students, which is expected to enhance autonomous self-regulation for learning and caring, as well as enable the teachers and students to be true allies in attempting to enhance caring and meaningful learning in the classroom. Because this component was not fully applied, we do not expand on it.

2 Continual support for teachers' implementation efforts from the principal

The principal's support may take different forms during the different phases of the small groups. Herein, we exemplify the principal's role in relation to phase C of those groups (i.e. learning and implementation of the five classroom features). We have found that the principal's involvement and support are crucial during this phase because of its effortful and time-consuming nature. Thus, because the individual conversations and the extraction of information from the questionnaires take considerable time and effort, it is important that the principal supports teachers through these processes. Teachers would not be autonomously self-regulated to administer and analyze the questionnaires or to conduct the personal conversations if they do not receive instrumental and moral support from the principal. Instrumental support includes re-arranging the curriculum and reducing the amount of time devoted to some academic subjects to allow enough time for teachers' personal conversations with students and individual consultations with the group facilitators, as well as scheduling the teachers' individual conversations with students at fixed times and places.

The principal and the school administration provide moral support by showing continual interest in each teacher's implementation attempts through regularly scheduled meetings. Of course, this interest should be conveyed in

an autonomy-supportive, rather than a controlling, manner, and involves an attempt to truly learn from the teachers about ways to improve the implementation and change process.

STUDIES INVESTIGATING THE LEARNING AND
IMPLEMENTATION STRUCTURE

Feinberg et al. (2006) assessed the impact of our first attempt to apply most of the components of the structure described above. The structure was applied for one and a half years, as part of a school-reform program conducted in three Israeli elementary schools serving mostly a Jewish population of low socio-economic status. Data were provided by 645 students from schools receiving the intervention and 340 students from matched-control schools. Analyses of questionnaire and open-response data showed no differences at baseline between the intervention and the control schools. However, two years later, students in schools receiving the intervention reported less violence, more caring among classmates, higher levels of limit-setting by teachers, and less coercive teacher practices. Moreover, the findings suggest that the program's positive effects stem, at least partially, from teachers' internalization of its principles. Thus, after two years of application, there were significant increases in autonomy-supportive and violence-limiting teacher behaviors, as well as decreases in controlling teacher behavior, only in classes whose primary teacher showed high levels of internalization. In other words, the effect of the intervention was significant only in classes whose teachers showed high levels of internalization.

Analyses of the teachers' free-response and interview data suggested that most of the teachers identified with the program and appreciated the need-supportive nature of the learning and implementation groups in which they had participated. In particular, teachers emphasized the groups' support for their needs for autonomy and relatedness, and the importance of learning the concepts of the basic psychological needs and the motivation continuum, which they saw as powerful tools for gaining deeper understanding of their students.

Assor et al.(2008) investigated our second, more comprehensive attempt to apply all the components of the learning and implementation structure described above in one elementary school serving 600 students. The structure was applied for one and a half years. Analyses of teachers' responses to interviews and questionnaires suggested that there were three aspects of the structure that were perceived by teachers as particularly helpful: (1) learning the motivation continuum and, to some extent, the basic psychological needs and the five classroom features; (2) the need-supportive small groups of

teachers; and (3) the importance of implementing the full program, including individual conversations, listening training, and principal's supports, when working on the five classroom features.

SUMMARY AND A CAVEAT

The results of our studies suggest that the proposed structure is likely to promote elementary-school teachers' internalization of important ideas and practices. Moreover, the findings of Feinberg et al. (2006) suggest that teachers' internalization of new ideas is likely to facilitate the enactment of those ideas in practice. It is important to note, however, that the positive results obtained thus far refer mainly to the first three phases of the teacher groups. Preliminary observations bearing on phase D (i.e. sharing influence and responsibility with students) suggest that this phase might be particularly difficult to apply in regular public schools.

A unique aspect of our approach was its focus on increasing teachers' attention to the needs and motivations of each student: that is, *empathic attention, follow-up, and conversations with each student* (particularly students experiencing adjustment problems). We did not focus much on specific teaching practices pertaining to competence or autonomy support. The basic assumption was that closer connection with each student, based on empathic attention to students' needs, would motivate teachers' to learn and develop appropriate competence- and autonomy-supportive practices. This approach appears to fit elementary schools; however, even at that level it might not be sufficient for most teachers. Future efforts may focus on finding ways to share influence and responsibility with students that are less threatening to teachers' needs. In addition, future work may also focus on ways of introducing specific competence- and autonomy-supportive practices to teachers.

Overall, the two studies reported above suggest that self-determination theory's concept of internalization and the proposed *learning and implementation structure* can help educators overcome the recurrent problem of the predictable failure of educational reforms (Sarason, 1993). As such, they can help to promote badly needed educational changes, and thus contribute to the development of students and teachers alike.

NOTES

1. Two types of program that consider teachers' needs are the school-based social and emotional learning programs examined by the collaborative for academic, social, and emotional learning (CASEL; Elias et al., 2003; Weissberg and O'Brien, 2004), and the First Things First program (Connell, 1996). However, those programs do not explicitly focus on the internalization process and the needs' supports that can promote it.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

AVI ASSOR is Professor and former Head of the Educational and School Psychology program in Ben Gurion University, Israel. His research focuses on processes affecting children's autonomous internalization of values. In addition, he is involved in the development and assessment of school reforms aimed at

enhancing students and teachers' basic psychological needs, intrinsic motivation and caring for others. His articles appeared in journals such as *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Child Development*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Journal of Personality*, *Journal of Educational Administration* and *Learning and Instruction*. Correspondence to: Avi Assor, Educational Psychology program, Ben Gurion University, Beer-Sheva 84105, Israel. [email: assor@bgu.ac.il]

OFRA FEINBERG (PhD) is Practicums' Coordinator and an Instructor in the Educational and School Psychology program in Ben Gurion University, Israel. She teaches practicum courses in school psychology for MA students. She also has a private practice as a clinical psychologist. Her primary interest is in school reform programs, and internalization of self-determination theory (SDT) principles as a guide for learning and change. She is especially interested in examining the effects of SDT-based school-reform programs on students' and teachers' well-being.

HAYA KAPLAN (PhD) is an Instructor in Kaye Academic College of Education, where she heads the Motivation Center; she also teaches in the Counseling, School Psychology and Teacher Education programs in Ben Gurion University, and runs comprehensive intervention programs in Bedouin high schools, aimed at enhancing autonomous motivation, leadership and achievement. Her primary interests are in educational reforms and career development based on self-determination principles. She has published in *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Learning and Instruction*, and *Motivation and Emotion*.

KAREN TAL is completing her PhD in Ben Gurion University. She teaches in the Educational and School Psychology program in Ben Gurion University and also works as a school psychologist. Her research focuses mainly on the effects of parental conditional regard on children's self-related emotions and academic coping. She is also interested in growth promoting school reforms.

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