

# *Administrative pressures and teachers' interpersonal behaviour in the classroom*

LUC G. PELLETIER AND ELIZABETH C. SHARP  
*University of Ottawa, Canada*

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present article is to review the contextual conditions that lead teachers to be more controlling rather than autonomy supportive with their students. Research indicates that the more teachers perceive that school administration thwarts their autonomy by imposing pressures on them, the less autonomous they are in their motivation for teaching, the more they become controlling in their teaching, and the more students demonstrate a controlled motivation orientation. At this point an element of reciprocity is introduced: teachers may be affected by the lack of students' motivation and their low performance because this reinforces the administration's perception that something needs to be done. Then teachers may perceive a pressure to behave in a controlling manner to be sure that the administration's standards are achieved.

KEY WORDS    *determinants of interpersonal behaviors, self-determination*

THE WAYS IN WHICH TEACHERS CAN ENHANCE OR UNDERMINE STUDENTS' MOTIVATION, well-being and functioning has been much studied in the past 25 years. Research focusing on self-determination theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan, 2000) has shown that teachers who have an autonomy-supporting style (as opposed to a controlling style) facilitate intrinsic motivation and self-determination in their students. These types of motivation are associated with many positive consequences for students, such as more positive emotions, feeling less distracted and anxious in class, more prolonged effort, learning centered on comprehension, better grades and less likelihood of dropout (Reeve et al., 2004; Ryan and Brown, 2005; Ryan and Deci, 2000). It is thus

*Theory and Research in Education*

Copyright © 2009, SAGE PUBLICATIONS, [www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)  
VOL 7(2) 174-183 ISSN 1477-8785 DOI: 10.1177/1477878509104322

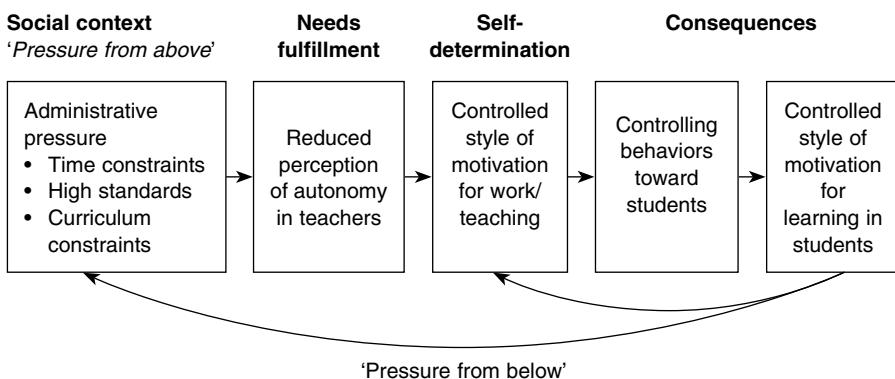
important to understand why some teachers support autonomy while others are controlling with students. An important line of research suggests that one reason why teachers may be controlling with students is that the administration is controlling with them. The goal of this article is to summarize this research.

#### PUTTING THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN CONTEXT

SDT proposes that our social context has an impact on the extent to which we feel autonomous, competent and related to others. In turn, the extent to which our basic needs are fulfilled impacts our motivation, with ensuing consequences on our affect, behavior and cognition. This conceptualization has proven useful in the education domain by explaining how teachers affect their students' motivation and behavior through the ways in which they support or thwart students' autonomy (Deci et al., 2001; Reeve et al., 2004).

A growing body of literature is focusing on the teachers' themselves, and how their social context affects them and their teaching behaviors. More specifically, as illustrated in Figure 1, the school administration, as part of teachers' social context, can thwart teachers' autonomy if it is controlling with them. This in turn leads to teachers being less autonomous in their motivation for teaching, with corresponding negative results on teachers' behaviors. At this point an element of reciprocity is introduced: teachers and students are each part of each others social context. Thus, as controlling teachers negatively affect students' motivation, the teachers are also affected by the students' motivation and behavior. Various components of this hypothesized sequence

FIGURE 1 *A process model of the effects of educational pressures on teachers' interpersonal behaviours and students' motivation*



have been tested, as will be described below, following the introduction of what is meant by autonomy support and control.

#### AUTONOMY SUPPORT VERSUS CONTROL

Autonomy support can be considered as a variety of behaviors that enhance another's feelings of volition and promote a perceived internal locus of control (Reeve et al., 2003). This style of interpersonal communication promotes a climate that meets another's psychological needs, interests and values. In contrast, a controlling style is characterized by an authoritarian approach that subverts their sense of agency and engagement in learning.

Several studies have examined the behaviors of autonomy-supportive and controlling teachers for the purpose of distinguishing more clearly what is meant by these two types of behaviors (Reeve, 2002; Reeve and Jang, 2006; Sarrazin et al., 2006). In essence, autonomy-supportive teachers are responsive (e.g. spend time listening, acknowledge the student's feelings and perspective), supportive (e.g. praise the quality of performance), explicative (e.g. provide a rationale for tasks and limits); they provide choice and opportunities for initiative taking and independent work, and they offer student discussion time. In opposition, controlling teachers essentially take charge (e.g. hold the instructional materials, use directives/commands), shape students toward a right answer (e.g. give solutions), motivate through pressure (e.g. threats, criticisms and deadlines), and don't allow students to work at their own pace or voice opinions contrary to their own (Assor et al., 2005).

The behaviors of controlling administrations are similar to those of controlling teachers. Also, they may impose demands such as time constraints or deadlines (e.g. teachers have to cover a certain curriculum in a specific time), performance evaluations, pressures to conform to certain teaching methods, or making teachers accountable for their students' level of performance (Pelletier et al., 2002; Reeve, 2002). These pressures can originate directly from the school administration or indirectly from school boards and parents that demand results.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE PRESSURES AND TEACHERS' INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIORS

The first studies on administrative pressures within the SDT framework examined how they affected teachers' interpersonal behaviors directly. Deci et al. (1982) provided the first test of the relations between the pressure that came from above, interpersonal behaviors, and intrinsic motivation. Participants in this study were instructed to help students learn to become better

problem solvers: some were further instructed that it was their job to ensure that their students performed 'up to high standards'. The results showed that teachers who had been pressured to have their students achieve high standards were more critical of the students, used more hints, more directive language and were more controlling than teachers who did not have to face such performance standards. In a field experiment of this question, Flink et al. (1990) looked at a school-based curriculum for elementary students. The results were similar to those of the laboratory study: teachers who faced external pressure toward higher standards were shown to be more likely to engage in controlling and instructing behaviors in their classrooms. The pressured teachers were also less effective: their students showed poorer performance on objective test-score outcomes.

Harackiewicz and Larson (1986) showed that a similar pattern of results emerged when supervisors were expected to use a specific means (monetary rewards) to motivate subordinates. The supervisors who had been instructed to administer rewards de-emphasized their own role as an independent source of information about the subordinates' performance and were more controlling. However, when supervisors were not expected to use rewards for maintaining their subordinates' interest, the effect disappeared. In other words, supervisors felt more responsible for their subordinates' task enjoyment and then became less controlling.

Finally, when asked directly, teachers confirm that pressures from above affect their choice of motivational strategies and behaviors in class (Taylor and Ntoumanis, 2007). When interviewed, the teachers said that factors such as time constraints, performance evaluations, and pressure from the school administration to conform to certain teaching methods impacted their use of motivational teaching strategies. Teachers reported being more controlling when they felt pressured to conform to certain teaching methods. They also felt that they were less autonomy supportive when they felt pressured by time constraints in lessons.

#### **THE EFFECTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE PRESSURES ON TEACHERS' AUTONOMY AND MOTIVATION**

Once the initial studies found an important link between administrative pressures and teachers' interpersonal behaviors, a subsequent series of studies examined whether these effects occurred through the processes proposed by SDT. In a study of 254 teachers, Pelletier et al. (2002) showed that the relation between administrative pressures in the workplace and teachers' autonomy-supportive behaviors was mediated by the effect of these pressures on their work motivation. More specifically, the more teachers felt pressured

by colleagues, the administration and constraints of the curriculum, the less self-determined was their work motivation, and, in turn, the less autonomy support they showed their students.

Recent studies included one more step to this link, finding that administrative pressures led teachers to feel less need satisfaction. In a recent study, Taylor et al. (2008) reported that the more teachers perceived job pressure (defined as time constraints, pressure from school authorities, and evaluation based on students' performance), the less they felt their basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness were satisfied. The level of need satisfaction was directly linked to teachers' self-determined motivation, which in turn impacted the extent to which they provided meaningful rationales, instrumental help and support, and gained an understanding of the students. Leroy et al. (2007) also observed that perceived pressures at school had a negative impact on teachers' sense of self-efficacy, and this in turn was associated with the extent to which they reported autonomy support.

The association between pressure at work and teachers' self-determined motivation is consistent with several studies inspired by SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000). According to SDT, the effect of external events on intrinsic motivation and self-determination depends on whether an individual perceives contexts as supportive of autonomy or controlling. Thus, these studies show that teachers do indeed perceive administrative pressures as controlling, which lead to lower need satisfaction and higher levels of controlled motivation towards teaching.

#### TEACHERS' MOTIVATION AND INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIORS

Although they did not directly examine pressures from above, several studies have looked at the impact of teachers' motivation on their interpersonal behaviors and their students' motivation. Roth et al. (2007) suggested that teachers' autonomous motivation should result in more autonomous motivation in students, for at least two reasons. First, because autonomous motivation is associated with the teachers' perceived value of the subjects they teach, it should lead to a better mastery of the subjects, to the provision of better rationales or examples in their teaching and more involvement in their teaching activities. Second, teachers with an autonomous orientation should have first-hand experience of the benefits associated with an autonomous orientation, and the fact that it leads to better quality of learning. For this reason, they should prefer that their students learn in a context that is conducive to that type of motivation and the type of values associated with it.

In an empirical test of the relationship between teacher's motivation and student's motivation, Wild et al. (1997: Study 2) found that participants who were taught a skill by an extrinsically motivated teacher reported lower interest in learning and lower task enjoyment than those taught by an intrinsically motivated teacher. A study by Garbarino (1975) suggests that this may be related to changes in teachers' behavior as a function of their motivation. This study found that rewarded teachers were more critical and demanding of their students than volunteer teachers. Consequently, students who were taught by rewarded teachers made more errors while learning a specific skill. A recent study by Roth et al. (2007) also suggests that the link between teachers' motivation and their students' motivation occurs because teachers' motivation translates into different behaviors as viewed by their students. More specifically, students rated autonomously motivated teachers as supporting their autonomy more, endorsing items such as 'The teacher encourages me to work in my own way', 'The teacher explains why it is important to study certain subjects in school.' Students also rated autonomously motivated teachers as providing more structured teaching and more involvement. These teacher behaviors were in turn associated with more autonomous motivation for learning in students, while controlled motivation for teaching led to controlling teaching, which in turn contributed to lower levels of self-determined motivation among students.

#### STUDENTS' MOTIVATION AND TEACHERS' MOTIVATION AND INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIORS

It is important to note that administrative pressures may happen in a context in which teachers feel that they are responsible for students who may not be motivated or able to meet the administration's standards. In these instances teachers should experience a pressure from below because the lack of students' motivation or their low performance reinforces the administration's perception that something needs to be done. Then teachers may perceive a pressure to behave in a controlling manner to be sure that the administration's standards are achieved.

For instance, several studies have shown that teachers or individuals in a supervising role behave differently depending on the subordinate's performance or productivity. Barrow (1976) and Lowin and Craig (1968) examined supervisors' reactions following an increase or decrease in the subordinate's performance and productivity. They observed that supervisors were more supportive, kind, and considerate when subordinates were perceived as productive. When subordinates were perceived as unproductive, supervisors became more controlling and relied on punishment to motivate them.

Regarding self-determination more specifically, studies in the laboratory and in the classroom have shown that when teachers believed that students were autonomously motivated they were more autonomy supportive and less controlling (Pelletier and Vallerand, 1996; Skinner and Belmont, 1993), and that the impact of students' motivation on teachers' interpersonal behaviors was actually mediated by teachers' motivation (Pelletier et al., 2002; Taylor and Ntoumanis, 2007; Taylor et al., 2008). In sum, these results support the idea that, when teachers interact with students, they often rely on their perceptions on the students' motivation as guides to their interpersonal behaviors.

#### DISCUSSION

In sum, research has shown that teachers are not immune to pressures from the administration such as restrictions about curricula, time constraints, or demands or rewards for high student performance. When teachers feel these administrative pressures, or when they believe that their students are extrinsically motivated or not motivated toward school, they are more likely to be controlling with students. It is possible that these conditions may directly affect teachers' behaviors or that they may undermine teachers' feelings of autonomy and motivation toward their own work, which in turn may lead them to be more controlling with their students.

How might administrations be more autonomy supportive? Evidently, they cannot eliminate all time constraints or performance evaluations. Nor would they want to, from an SDT perspective. SDT suggests that structure is important, and that in fact it is the way in which limits are set and communicated that can be controlling. Research suggests that the provision of a rationale is a particularly important element of communicating justifications for an activity in an autonomy-supportive way (Deci et al., 1994). Future research may examine whether a clear mission and vision framed in terms of intrinsic goals (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006) as opposed to high stakes standards (Ryan and Brown, 2005) may serve this role in an organizational context and then may promote an autonomy-supportive climate for teaching. One study of Australian teachers provides an initial hint that the elaboration and communication of a good mission may prove a fruitful avenue: the more teachers understood and agreed with the school mission and its associated goals, the less they suffered from emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and the more personal accomplishment they felt (Dorman, 2003). This suggests that in the long run less pressure from above may not only be beneficial for the students' motivation, it may also be beneficial for the teachers' well-being.

REF E R E N C E S

- Assor, A., Kaplan, H., Kanat-Maymom, Y. and Roth, G. (2005) 'Directly controlling teacher behaviors as predictors of poor motivation and engagement in girls and boys: The role of anger and anxiety', *Learning and Instruction* 15: 397–413.
- Barrow, J.C. (1976) 'Worker performance and task complexity as causal determinants of leader behavior, style, and flexibility', *Journal of Applied Psychology* 61: 433–40.
- Deci, E.L. and Ryan, R.M. (2000) 'The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior', *Psychological Inquiry* 11: 227–68.
- Deci, E.L., Eghrari, H., Patrick, B.C. and Leone, D. (1994) 'Facilitating internalization: The self-determination theory perspective', *Journal of Personality* 62: 119–42.
- Deci, E.L., Koestner, R. and Ryan, R.M. (2001) 'Extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivation in education: Reconsidered once again', *Review of Educational Research* 71: 1–27.
- Deci, E.L., Spiegel, N.H., Ryan, R.M., Koestner, R. and Kauffman, M. (1982) 'Effects of performance standards on teaching behavior of controlling teachers', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 74: 852–9.
- Dorman, J.P. (2003) 'Relationship between school and classroom environment and teacher burnout: A LISREL analysis', *Social Psychology of Education* 6: 107–27.
- Flink, C., Boggiano, A.K. and Barrett, M. (1990) 'Controlling teaching strategies: Undermining children's self-determination and performance', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59: 916–24.
- Garbarino, J. (1975) 'The impact of anticipated reward upon cross-aged tutoring', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32: 421–8.
- Harackiewicz, J.M. and Larson, J.R. (1986) 'Managing motivation: The impact of supervisor feedback on subordinate task interest', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51: 547–56.
- Leroy, N., Bressous, P., Sarrazin, P. and Trouilloud, D. (2007) 'Impact of teachers' implicit theories and perceived pressures on the establishment of an autonomy supportive climate', *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 22: 529–45.
- Lowin, A. and Craig, J. (1968) 'The influence of level of performance on managerial style: An experimental object-lesson in the ambiguity of correlational data', *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 3: 440–58.
- Pelletier, L.G. and Vallerand, R.J. (1996) 'Supervisors' beliefs and subordinates' intrinsic motivation: A behavioral confirmation analysis', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71: 331–340.
- Pelletier, L.G., Séguin-Lévesque, C. and Legault, L. (2002) 'Pressure from above and pressure from below as determinants of teachers' motivation and teaching behaviors', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 94: 186–96.
- Reeve, J. (2002) 'Self-determination theory applied to educational settings', in E.L. Deci and R.M. Ryan (eds), *Handbook of Self-determination Research*, pp. 183–203. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.

- Reeve, J. and Jang, H. (2006) 'What teachers say and do to support students' autonomy during a learning activity', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 98: 209–18.
- Reeve, J., Deci, E. L. and Ryan, R.M. (2004) 'Self-determination theory: A dialectical framework for understanding socio-cultural influences on student motivation', in D.M. McInerney and S. Van Etten (eds), *Big Theories Revisited*, pp. 31–60. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Press.
- Reeve, J., Nix, G. and Hamm, D. (2003) 'Testing models of the experience of self-determination in intrinsic motivation and the conundrum of choice', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95: 375–92.
- Roth, G., Assor, A., Kanat-Maymon, Y. and Kaplan, H. (2007) 'Autonomous motivation for teaching: How self-determined teaching may lead to self-determined learning', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 99: 761–74.
- Ryan, R.M. and Brown, K.W. (2005) 'Legislating competence: High-stakes testing policies and their relations with psychological theories and research', in A.J. Elliot and C.S. Dweck (eds) *Handbook of Competence and Motivation*, pp. 354–72. New York, NY: Guilford Publications.
- Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2000) 'Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions', *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25: 54–67.
- Sarrazin, P.G., Tessier, D.P., Pelletier, L.G., Trouilloud, D.O. and Chanal, J.P. (2006) 'The effects of teachers' expectations about students' motivation on teachers' autonomy-supportive and controlling behaviors', *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 4: 283–301.
- Skinner, E.A. and Belmont, M.J. (1993) 'Motivation in the classroom: Reciprocal effects of teacher behavior and student engagement across the school year', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 85: 571–81.
- Taylor, I. M. and Ntoumanis, N. (2007) 'Teacher motivational strategies and student self-determination in physical education', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 99: 747–60.
- Taylor, I.M., Ntoumanis, N. and Standage, M. (2008) 'A self-determination theory approach to understanding the antecedents of teachers' motivational strategies in physical education', *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 30: 75–94.
- Vansteenkiste, M., Lens, W. and Deci, E.L. (2006) 'Intrinsic versus extrinsic goal-contents in self-determination theory: Another look at the quality of academic motivation', *Educational Psychologist* 41: 19–31.
- Wild, T., Enzle, M.E., Nix, G. and Deci, E.L. (1997) 'Perceiving others as intrinsically or extrinsically motivated: Effects on expectancy formation and task engagement', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23: 837–48.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

LUC G. PELLETIER is Professor and Chair of Psychology at the University of Ottawa. He is also the Associate Editor of *Canadian Psychology*. He is the author of over 100 published works on human motivation and self-determination. His primary research interests focus on individuals' motivation and self-regulation in several different contexts (such as education, sport, the regulation of eating

*Pelletier and Sharp: Administrative pressures*

behaviors and pro-environmental behaviors) and how the tailoring and the framing of information can affect motivation in these contexts. He is also interested in examining the determinants of autonomy supportive and controlling interpersonal behaviors.[email: Luc.Pelletier@uOttawa.ca]

ELIZABETH C. SHARP is a post-doctoral fellow in experimental psychology at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Her research focuses on the relationships between self-determination, feelings of vitality and successful self-regulation in areas such as academic procrastination.

# Theory and Research in Education

<http://tre.sagepub.com>

---

## **Administrative pressures and teachers' interpersonal behaviour in the classroom**

Luc G. Pelletier and Elizabeth C. Sharp

*Theory and Research in Education* 2009; 7; 174

DOI: 10.1177/1477878509104322

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://tre.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/7/2/174>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Theory and Research in Education* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://tre.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://tre.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://tre.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/7/2/174>