

# *How K-12 teachers can put self-determination theory principles into practice*

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## ABSTRACT

We discuss how K-12 teachers can put motivational principles from self-determination theory into practice. To explain the 'how to' of autonomy-supportive teaching, we 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.

KEYWORDS *autonomy support, engagement, motivation, self-determination theory, teaching, inner motivational resources*

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE is to participate in a conversation with K-12 teachers about how they can put motivational principles from self-determination theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan, 1985) into classroom practice by adopting an autonomy-supportive motivating style. We are operating

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under the assumption that the reader is familiar with the wealth of positive student outcomes associated with the use of this style (for a review, see Reeve et al., 2004a), so we will focus on the ‘how to’ rather than on the ‘why’ of autonomy-supportive teaching. Because this is a conversation, we give teachers the first word by listing their most commonly asked questions when trying to put SDT principles into classroom practice:

- 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?

#### AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE MOTIVATING STYLE





In the SDT framework, the quality of a teacher’s motivating style during instruction exists on a bipolar continuum ranging from highly controlling to highly autonomy supportive (Deci et al., 1981). Autonomy support represents acts of instruction to identify, nurture, and develop students’ inner motivational resources, such as their interests, preferences, goals, and psychological needs (Assor et al., 2002; Reeve, 2006). The premise on which this article rests is that students benefit when teachers support their autonomy, as evidenced from their enhanced motivation, engagement, learning, and psychological well-being. This premise has been shown to apply across a diverse range of students, including students in preschool (Koestner et al., 1984), elementary school (Deci et al., 1981), middle school (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005), and high school (Reeve et al., 2004); students with special needs (Deci et al., 1992); and students in after-school programs (Grolnick et al., 2007).

#### EIGHT TEACHER-GENERATED QUESTIONS

Figure 1 provides a framework K-12 teachers can use to put SDT principles into classroom practice. It does so by pairing the eight teacher-asked questions introduced above with the autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors that will be recommended and highlighted in this article.

*What is the goal of autonomy-supportive teaching?* The goal of autonomy-supportive teaching is to identify, nurture, and develop the inner motivational resources that already exist in students. Such an approach to student motivation

FIGURE 1 A framework to help K-12 teachers to put an autonomy-supportive motivating style into classroom practice

Teacher-asked questions about an autonomy-supportive motivating style			
<b>Pre-lesson reflection</b>	<b>Motivating students</b>	<b>Solving problems</b>	<b>Post-lesson reflection</b>
<p>Q1: What is the goal of autonomy-supportive teaching?</p> <p>Q2: How is autonomy-supportive teaching unique?</p> <p>Q3: Does autonomy support mean permissiveness?</p>	<p>Q4: How would I encourage students' initial engagement in learning activities?</p> <p>Q5: How could I help students maintain their engagement?</p>	<p>Q6: What would I say? How might I talk?</p> <p>Q7: How would I solve motivational and behavioral problems?</p>	<p>Q8: How do I know if I provided instruction in an autonomy-supportive way?</p>
			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take the students' perspective</li> <li>• Display patience to allow time for learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurture inner motivational resources</li> <li>• Provide explanatory rationales</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rely on noncontrolling language</li> <li>• Acknowledge and accept negative effect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take the students' perspective</li> <li>• Welcome students' thoughts, feelings, goals, and behaviors</li> <li>• Support students' motivational development</li> </ul>
Recommended autonomy-supportive instructional strategies			

is largely unique, as relatively few educators think about student motivation in terms of vitalizing inner resources, while relatively many think in terms of environmental contingencies (behaviorism), tutoring (social cognitive), and modeling (social learning). When teachers realize the goals of autonomy-supportive teaching, students experience their classroom participation as an opportunity to experience, pursue, and enrich personally relevant interests and goals. Importantly, the instructional effort of identifying, nurturing, and developing students' inner motivational resources does not require an intensive analysis of, or differentiated instruction for, every student. Instead, many motivational resources are universal (e.g. psychological needs, curiosity), and may be applied generally across a classroom of students.

*How is autonomy-supportive teaching unique?* If a teacher wishes to adopt an autonomy-supportive style, a fundamental question is how it might differ from what they already do. Supporting autonomy begins with a deeply rooted willingness and capacity to take and prioritize the students' perspective during learning activities. Doing so often involves soliciting students' input, conducting formative assessments, and asking reflective questions, such as 'If I were the student (rather than the teacher), what would I want the teacher to do?', 'Can I make this lesson more interesting?', and 'Is the subject matter important and useful to my students and, if so, how can I highlight that personal relevance?' Of course, many teachers already ask such questions, and many teachers may not find our recommended instructional strategies to be entirely novel. But the twin focus of taking the students' perspective and vitalizing their inner motivational resources is unique to autonomy-supportive teaching.

*Does autonomy support mean permissiveness?* The third question asks whether autonomy support means high permissiveness or the removal of structure. Laissez-faire permissiveness (i.e. students do whatever they want) is a poor motivational strategy (Jang et al., in press b), one that fails to reflect the teacher's active, on-going, and reflective efforts to identify, nurture, and develop students' inner resources. Autonomy-supportive teachers are, however, patient, though they display their patience within the context of structured learning opportunities. Structure refers to the extent to which teachers help students perceive strong and reliable associations between what they do during class (behaviors) and what happens as a result (outcomes) (Skinner, 1996). If students do their homework (behavior), will they receive higher marks on tomorrow's quiz (outcome)? Compared to their more controlling counterparts, autonomy-supportive teachers actually provide *more*, not less, classroom structure (Jang et al., in press b). Unfortunately, some attempts to increase structure make the mistake of creating a classroom climate that is controlling or authoritarian. Such confusion between structure and control may lead a well-intentioned educator to inadvertently damage rather than support students' motivation. Core elements of classroom structure that are fully consistent with the implementation of autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors include clear expectations, guidance for students' activity, and constructive feedback; noncore elements of structure that students routinely experience as controlling include environmental contingencies designed to assert a teacher's authority, retaliate against student misconduct, or otherwise coerce specific behaviors with apparent disregard for students' perspectives.

*How would I encourage students' initial engagement in learning activities?* Sparking initial engagement involves offering lesson plans that bring students' inner motivational resources into the learning activity. Autonomy-supportive

teachers do this by finding ways to coordinate instructional activities with students' inner motivational resources (e.g. How can I challenge students' sense of competence during this lesson?), rather than neglecting or by-passing these inner resources in favor of directives, compliance requests, and incentives that are only arbitrarily related to the activity. For instance, engagement is higher when teachers offer lessons built around students' interests (Schraw and Lehman, 2001), autonomy (Reeve and Jang, 2006), competence (Ryan and Grolnick, 1986), relatedness (Furrer and Skinner, 2003), preferences (Halusic and Reeve, 2009), sense of challenge (Clifford, 1990), personalization (Cordova and Lepper, 1996), and intrinsic goals (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). The point here is to capitalize on the processes that naturally elicit student motivation rather than making students force themselves to pay attention or participate.

In addition, when teachers ask students to engage in potentially uninteresting activities (e.g. homework assignments, rule following), they can (1) offer explanatory rationales (e.g. 'The reason I am asking you to do this is because . . .') and (2) frame lessons within the context of intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, goals (e.g. 'As you learn these vocabulary words, it may be an opportunity to grow your skill as a writer.'). Doing so facilitates students' appreciation, understanding, and internalization for why the otherwise uninteresting activity is actually a personally useful thing to do (Assor et al., 2002; Husman and Lens, 1999; Jang, 2008; Koestner et al., 1984; Reeve et al., 2002; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). This allows students to approach activities with a sense of purpose (Brophy, 2008). Explanatory rationales and intrinsic goals are not contrived excuses for learning but, instead, are opportunities to explain why a teacher-recommended action is truly and authentically worth the students' time and effort. Sometimes, a teacher needs merely to bring students' attention to the activity's usefulness; other times, a teacher needs to redesign the learning activity to make the relevant aspects more central (Brophy, 2008).

*How could I help students maintain their engagement?* A fifth question asks how teachers might maintain students' engagement once the activity has begun. Part of motivation concerns the initiation of behavior (e.g. starting a lesson), but motivation also concerns the persistence of that behavior until the sought-after goal has been realized (e.g. until curiosity is satisfied, a skill is improved, or a lesson is understood). Instructional strategies to nurture students' inner motivational resources not only spark initial engagement, they also reliably provide students with a sense of vitality that supports on-going persistence. For instance, providing conditions that satisfy students' psychological needs for autonomy (e.g. intrinsic goals, explanatory rationales), competence (e.g. mastery goal climate, optimal challenge, constructive feedback), and relatedness (e.g. cooperative learning, a feeling of classroom community) have all

been shown to enhance students' persistence and deeper engagement (Jang, 2008; Hardre and Reeve, 2003; Vallerand et al., 1997; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

*What would I say? How might I talk?* A sixth question asks how teachers might talk to students in ways that support, rather than interfere with, their autonomy. When communicating classroom requirements, when asking students to take responsibility for their own learning, and when providing feedback, teachers who adopt an autonomy-supportive style rely on nonevaluative, flexible, and informational language. The purpose is to minimize externally-oriented and pressure-laden forms of external regulation that by-pass, or even damage, students' inner motivational resources. Noncontrolling language (e.g. 'I suggest . . .') encourages students' volitional engagement (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004), while informational language supports students' understanding and solving of their behavioral problems and poor performances (e.g. instead of 'you should work harder', consider 'I've noticed your work has slipped lately; do you know why that might be?').

*How would I solve motivational and behavioral problems?* Motivational and behavioral problems occur for the simple reason that classrooms have rules, requests, requirements, and agendas that are sometimes at odds with students' preferences and natural inclinations. Under such conditions, students understandably complain, resist, and express negative effect. In turn, teachers frequently respond with counter-directives and efforts to suppress these criticisms (Assor et al., 2005). While this may appear to be an instance of directly addressing the problem, it often leaves students with the impression that teachers are insensitive to their concerns (e.g. 'She would never ask us to speak in front of the class if she realized how humiliating it feels.'). Alternatively, when teachers acknowledge, accept, and even welcome expressions of negative effect, they communicate an understanding of the students' perspectives and put themselves in a position to receive students' negative emotionality as constructive information to transform an instructional activity from 'something not worth doing' (in the eyes of the students) into 'something worth doing' (e.g. by saying, 'Yes, okay, the assigned book is long, isn't it? Can anyone share a personal experience in which they figured out how to read 300 pages in a week?').

*How do I know if I provided instruction in an autonomy-supportive way?* Following an instructional episode, a teacher can reflect on the quality of his or her motivating style. When autonomy supportive, teachers take their students' perspective, welcome and incorporate students' thoughts, feelings, goals, and behaviors into the flow of instruction, and support their motivational development; when controlling, teachers target prescribed outcomes ('do this'), intrude on and interfere with students' thoughts, feelings, goals, and

behaviors, and push and pressure students into compliance (Reeve, in press). It is through the specific instructional behaviors listed in the lower part of Figure 1 that teachers create and provide classroom conditions that support students' autonomy and motivational development.

TEACHERS CAN BECOME MORE AUTONOMY  
SUPPORTIVE

Some have argued that autonomy support is purely a result of a teacher's personality, and that becoming autonomy supportive is tantamount to – and about as realistic as – adopting a new personality. This has been demonstrated to be untrue. Teachers can learn how to become more autonomy supportive, and this has been shown to be true for preservice teachers (Reeve, 1998), middle-school teachers (deCharms, 1976), and high-school teachers (Reeve, et al., 2004b), among others. When learning almost any new behavior, it helps to have feedback about how one is doing. In that spirit, Table 1 lists questionnaire items from the Learning Climate Questionnaire (Williams and Deci, 1996) to index students' perceptions of a teacher's style as autonomy supportive and questionnaire items from the Teacher Controllingness Scale (Jang et al., in press a) to index students' perceptions of a teacher's style as controlling. Asking students to complete these questionnaires can provide helpful feedback in the teacher's effort to become more autonomy supportive.

TABLE 1 Questionnaire items to assess students' perceptions of a teacher's motivating style

<i>Items to assess perceived autonomy support<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Items to assess perceived controllingness<sup>b</sup></i>
1. I feel that my teacher provides me with choices and options.	1. My teacher tries to control everything I do.
2. I feel understood by my teacher.	2. My teacher is inflexible.
3. My teacher conveys confidence in my ability to do well in the course.	3. My teacher uses forceful language.
4. My teacher encourages me to ask questions.	4. My teacher puts a lot of pressure on me.
5. My teacher listens to how I would like to do things.	
6. My teacher tries to understand how I see things before suggesting a new way to do things.	

<sup>a</sup> Items from the short-version of the Learning Climate Questionnaire.

<sup>b</sup> Items from the Teacher Controllingness Scale.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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