



Large-scale school reform as viewed from the self-determination theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Successful school reform requires that administrators, teachers, and students internalize the value of improved teaching and learning and of the policies, structures, procedures, and behaviors implicit in the reform. This is most likely to happen when school personnel and students experience satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness while planning and implementing the reform. When the components of a reform are relatively flexible rather than rigid and when the processes through which the reform is introduced and implemented are autonomy supportive, people will experience greater need satisfaction and will be more likely to internalize and endorse the reform. This article focuses on one approach to comprehensive school reform, namely, First Things First, and examines it in terms of self-determination theory principles.

KEYWORDS *First Things First, high school reform, psychological need satisfaction, self-determination theory*

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY (SDT; Deci and Ryan, 2000), effective change in organizations occurs to the extent that people in the organizations have fully internalized its importance. Such internalization will occur when both the nature of the change and the process through which it is facilitated allow satisfaction of people's basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness with respect to the change (Baard et al., 2004).

In the USA and other countries there is considerable discussion about an educational crisis, and numerous commentators have called for change in educational organizations with widely varied prescriptions for the changes.

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SDT has not outlined a specific approach to educational reform, but it does provide a perspective that can speak to the likely effectiveness of reform approaches outlined by others. In this article I use the SDT perspective to comment on various issues related to school reform.

One approach to reform, represented by Feinberg et al.'s (2007) work in Israel, is outlined in this issue. Using that general approach, administrators and teachers from schools work together, typically facilitated by change agents, to create and implement strategies for improving teaching, learning, and comportment within their schools. In the Israeli work, the process involved a change agent teaching SDT principles to school personnel and then supporting them to formulate changes that use those principles to create environments that facilitate greater satisfaction of the students' basic psychological needs. This represents a 'self-generated' approach to reform in the sense that the changes are reflections of the ideas, beliefs, and values of the people who design and implement them – in other words, they evolve from the experiences of the school personnel. As an approach to reform, this tends to allow administrators and teachers to feel effective in their participation; it gives them a sense of initiative, volition, and ownership of the reform; and it encourages a sense of belongingness and relatedness with others who are part of the change process. To the extent that external change agents and school administrators facilitate this approach in a responsive and autonomy-supportive way, the experience for all participants will likely be need satisfying and the change will likely be effective.

This process of change, which allows participants to feel good about the change and about their involvement in it, was shown empirically to be effective in promoting positive change in the Israeli schools and thus represents a model for change in other schools. Still, this type of reform approach is typically time consuming and can be cumbersome, expensive, and difficult, particularly in large schools that have severe learning and behavior problems, few supports and resources, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Because of these considerations, especially in the current, high-stakes political climate created in part by US federal legislation, educational researchers and practitioners have developed various structured approaches to school reform that tend to be prescribed and implemented by district and school administrators, typically with facilitation by external change agents.

According to SDT, the effectiveness of a structured change process will require people to internalize the value and behavioral regulations that are its key components. In other words, administrators and teachers must internalize the structures that constitute the reform and then implement them in working with students. It is important to note that, within SDT, structure is *not* the same thing as control, although the terms are sometimes used

interchangeably. Rather, structure represents an aspect of social environments that specifies guidelines and information about the relation between behaviors and consequences. Structures can vary both in the degree to which they are inherently rigid, critical, and pressuring, and in the extent to which they are implemented in an autonomy-supportive (as opposed to controlling) way. When the structures implicit in a reform approach are inherently less rigid and are implemented in an autonomy-supportive way, they are more likely to be successful in facilitating effective teaching, learning, and educational outcomes such as improved achievement and progress toward graduation.

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL REFORM

SDT maintains that the design of a school-reform approach must begin with the realization that teachers and students alike have inherent psychological needs to feel competent in relation to their environment, autonomous in regulating their behavior, and related meaningfully to others. Feelings of ownership of and commitment to a reform are expected to occur when its structures were designed to support satisfaction of the teachers' and students' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan, 1995; Ryan and Deci, 2000b). Moreover, implementation of the reform, with the help of a change agent, needs to model responsiveness and autonomy support by having the change agents be responsive to administrators and teachers, thus allowing these school personnel to feel a sense of volition, choice, and effectiveness in carrying out the reform. If done properly, administrators and teachers come to view the reform simply as the way they run the school, do their teaching, and support their students' learning. In this article, I discuss one structured approach to comprehensive school reform from the perspective of SDT as a case study in educational improvement.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) implements First Things First (FTF), a structured approach to comprehensive school reform developed by James P. Connell and associates. FTF has been used almost exclusively in school districts serving high percentages of disadvantaged students, racial and ethnic minorities, and students for whom English is not their first language. High schools with thousands of students have implemented FTF.

FTF is a set of structures, policies, procedures, activities, and curricula that were intended to allow satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for

Deci: Large-scale school reform

competence, autonomy, and relatedness in relation to schoolwork by supporting meaningful relationships among and between teachers and students in schools, making interesting assignments that are optimally challenging, providing meaningful feedback, and offering opportunities to explore, be self-initiating, and develop stronger learning-related values. FTF has three key strategies: small learning communities (SLCs), a family and student advocate system (FAS), and instructional improvement (II).

Small learning communities

The SLC strategy begins by breaking large schools into smaller ‘schools-within-schools’. Typical SLCs range from 150 students in elementary schools to 350 in high schools, and students spend the large majority of their time within their own SLC on each day and across years. In high schools, for example, students typically stay with the same SLC for all four years. Each SLC has between 10 and 20 teachers, and the teachers, like the students, stay primarily in their own SLC across days and years. Thus, both teachers and students tend to be more involved with their SLCs than with the larger school. A key aim in creating the SLCs is to provide the context within which teachers know both their colleagues and students, so the teachers both feel a sense of relatedness with each other and facilitate the students’ sense of relatedness with their teachers and peers. As teachers get to know students better they are more able to understand the students’ perspectives, which is the basis for supporting the students’ autonomy and competence.

As designed, teachers within SLCs have some latitude to make decisions about issues relevant to them, which allows them to feel respected by the district and school administration and in turn helps them experience greater psychological need satisfaction. Built into the concept of SLCs is common planning time. For three hours per week, teachers within an SLC meet together to engage in a variety of activities, including having discussions about students’ progress and performance and how those can be improved, in part through improved instruction.

The family and student advocate system

The FAS involves groups consisting of one teacher (the advocate) and 15 to 20 students, all from the same SLC and distributed across the grades (e.g. grades 9 through 12 in high schools). Students stay in their FAS group for all years they are in the SLC. The advocate and students typically meet weekly to address an array of student concerns related to making progress in school. During common planning time, if a particular student is discussed, it is the

advocate who is expected to have the most current relevant information about the student. Another purpose of the FAS is for the advocate to be a liaison with the families of the students in his or her group. This process encourages the students' families to be more involved with their children's education and may facilitate greater relatedness between the students and their parents.

The SLC and FAS strategies together represent the structural and interpersonal means through which all individuals within a school can develop relationships, find and give support, and experience relational satisfaction. Within these relationships, individuals also have opportunities to experience satisfaction of their competence and autonomy needs, because important others (namely teachers for students and administrators for teachers) are more likely to support the needs of people with whom they have better relationships.

Instructional Improvement

Implementation of the SLCs and FAS sets the stage for the central activities of school, namely, teaching and learning. The third key strategy of FTF is instructional improvement (II), which focuses on improving the methods, materials, contents, pace, and quality of instruction in order to stimulate greater student autonomous motivation and learning (Connell and Broom, 2004). II involves creating enriched learning opportunities that are engaging and optimally challenging for students and are consistent with the schools' standards. It also includes professional development for teachers and administrators, which initially tends to be the same for all teachers and administrators using FTF. Eventually, though, teachers in an SLC choose training modules from an extensive list for further professional development. In line with the idea that choice facilitates autonomy, one module focuses on promoting choice in the classroom. The II strategy also provides activities for teachers to do during common planning time to improve instruction in their SLC. These activities are intended to enhance administrators' and teachers' perceptions of competence and allow them in turn to support the students' competence. The choice of modules and the choice module are also geared toward satisfaction of the teachers' need for autonomy and helping the teachers support the students' autonomy.

Instructional improvement is organized in terms of three primary goals. The first is promoting students' active *engagement* in learning activities. Engagement is enhanced by providing activities that have relevance to students' lives, are diverse and challenging, are perceived as interesting and important, and require more than just sitting at a desk and listening to a lesson. Such activities facilitate autonomous motivation by allowing students to experience a

sense of volition and choice, and they tend to elicit intrinsic interest. When students are fully engaged in school activities it is very likely that their teachers are teaching well and that they are learning. A student who is merely compliant is controlled rather than autonomously motivated and will *not* be fully engaged.

The second goal of II is *alignment*, which refers to having learning materials, assignments, instructional periods, and student work reflect academic standards that have been endorsed by the district, are consistent with state standards, and facilitate mastery of the methods and materials used on the state's high-stakes assessments. Alignment is not an endorsement of the high-stakes assessments, nor does it mean 'teaching to the tests' as so often happens in schools facing high-stakes tests. Rather, it concerns focusing on the important things students need to learn in order to function competently in the world, such as reading well and doing age-appropriate math.

The third goal of II is *rigor*, which means that teachers provide optimally challenging work for all students and believe that the students can do it. The aim is for teachers to recognize students' learning potentials and to empower them to live up to those potentials. Although rigor is often misinterpreted to mean that instruction should be very difficult, that is not its intended meaning in FTF because overly difficult work promotes anxiety rather than engagement. Instead, rigor is intended to convey that instruction should provide a reasonable challenge for all students, which means that, to some extent, instruction needs to be individualized for students. Such optimally difficult material has been found to contribute to autonomous motivation and engagement especially when it is delivered in an autonomy-supportive way (Ryan and Deci, 2000a).

Technical assistance

FTF also involves technical assistance (TA) provided by IRRE staff members or consultants to ensure the fidelity of the reform. IRRE-provided TA includes facilitating the planning and implementation of FTF's key strategies, as well as conducting professional development for administrators and teachers, and facilitating effective leadership at the school and district levels. One critical element of providing effective TA is doing it in an autonomy-supportive way. In other words, for the structures of the SLC, FAS, and II strategies to be internalized by administrators and teachers and for the importance of learning school subjects to be internalized by students, the TA supports must be provided in an autonomy-supportive way. This means that

the TA providers understand and relate to the administrators', teachers', and students' perspectives, offer choice, provide a rationale for requested change, minimize pressure and control, and both encourage and be responsive to the others' initiations (Deci et al., 1994). As TA providers use such autonomy-enhancing methods, they are not only affecting the internal motivation and learning of the people in the schools, but they are also modeling autonomy support, which will be critical for the school personnel to use when they are relating to the students.

EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE EFFICACY OF FTF

A study by Quint et al. (2005) investigated the impact of FTF in five districts, at varied stages of implementation. Comparison schools were selected for each intervention site, matched as closely as possible on pre-intervention test scores and other variables such as school size, racial/ethnic make-up, and percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches. The evaluations indicated that the intervention can be highly successful in implementing the SLC, FAS, and II strategies, which in turn can yield improvements in teacher and student relationships, motivation and engagement, and the educational outcomes of attendance, progress toward graduation, and proficiency levels on standardized exams. In another study, Levin et al. (2006) reported that FTF was the only approach to comprehensive school reform examined that showed evidence of improving graduation rates and was the most cost-effective of the reform models they considered.

Nonetheless, the efficacy of the intervention has varied among districts and schools. Based on anecdotal evidence, variability in the success of implementation seems to be due primarily to the level of commitment of top district and building administrators. To the extent that they have not internalized the value of the reform, either because of some agenda of their own or because the board has not been autonomy supportive in introducing them to it, the top-level administrators will not provide the support needed for others in the district and schools to internalize the reform's value. It seems clear, then, that a critical condition for successful implementation is that top administrators have internalized the value of the reform structures and the behavioral regulations necessary to carry them out as well as the value of supporting others to do so. In the districts where the intervention has not been successful, the administrators were not committed to the reform, and the board members did not support the administrators in ways that facilitated the necessary internalization.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Implementing school reform in large dysfunctional schools is extremely difficult. Structured reform models may be a useful option for changing structures, policies, and practices of schools in ways that result in greater autonomous motivation and commitment of administrators, teachers, and students and that, in turn, yield more effective learning and achievement. First Things First is one such model that has been found to be efficacious, although it has not worked well in districts that lack commitment.

FTF provides three key strategies – small learning communities, a family and student advocate system, and instructional improvement – as well as technical assistance for implementation. The model was intended to facilitate changes that result in greater satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness among administrators, teachers, and students. When it functions effectively, it has been found to promote improved educational outcomes. As the basic psychological needs of administrators, teachers, and students are supported, those individuals are more likely to internalize the importance of the reform and of the goals of students' learning, achieving, and effectively negotiating the challenges of life. Some school districts in US cities such as Kansas City, KS, have shown extraordinary improvements in educational outcomes as a result of effective implementation of the FTF approach.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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