

Autonomy Supportive Classroom Environment For High School Students

Review of Literature

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Fostering autonomy supportive classroom environment for high school students

This literature review examines five articles that I have selected to address the ways in which schools/teachers can provide an autonomy supportive learning environment to students (specifically high school students). The articles unify around the principle of Deci & Ryan Self-Determination Theory, which asserts autonomy as one of human's innate psychological needs, and argues that supporting an individual's autonomy fosters "the most volitional and high quality forms of motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity." (<http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory>). Furthermore, the articles stem from the premise that while autonomy support has been evidenced to be beneficial to students, controlling instructional styles are still prevalent in most schools.

Reeve (2009), drawing from previous studies/research, such as, (Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003), postulates that a controlling learning environment induces pressure in students to satisfy other's expectations as opposed to their own expectations in their education process, thereby, compromising students' general psychological well-being as well as their academic performance. An autonomy-supportive learning environment on the other hand, supports students' choice and decision-making, and fosters students' "positive functioning". The article discusses obstacles teachers face – pressure from above (e.g., administration, policies, state/federal mandates), pressure from below (e.g., students, parents), and pressure from within (teacher's own beliefs and values). It then presents specific autonomy-supportive "enabling conditions": adopting the students' perspective, welcoming students' thoughts, feelings and actions, and supporting students' motivational development and capacity for autonomous self-regulation. The study

concludes by proposing, five “instructional behaviors” to help teachers foster an autonomy supportive learning environment: nurturing inner motivational resources, providing explanatory rationales, relying on non-controlling and informational language, displaying patience to allow time for self-paced learning, and acknowledging and accepting expressions of negative affect. These five “instructional behaviors” are explored again in Reeve & Halusic (2009).

Reeve & Halusic (2009) answers eight teacher-generated questions on how to implement motivational principles of Self Determination Theory (<http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory>) in their classrooms. Strategies that address the questions are categorized into four areas allowing teachers to focus on their specific area: “Pre-lesson reflection, Motivating students, Solving problems, Post-lesson reflection”. Furthermore, the answers to the questions directly tie into the seven “instructional behaviors” discussed in Reeve (2009). By drawing from previously proven studies, [(Reeve, 1998), (deCharms, 1976), (Reeve, et. al., 2004b)], the authors conclude that autonomy support is not “purely” the result of a teacher’s personality; teachers at all levels (pre-service to veterans, k-12 schools) can learn to be autonomy supportive.

Jang, Reeve, & Deci (2010) study examined the relationship between autonomy support and structure as it relates to students’ motivation and engagement in learning. This relationship has been portrayed as being “antagonistic, curvilinear, and independent”. However, the study showed, autonomy and structure are complementary and interdependent in motivating and engaging students. Furthermore, teachers’ instructional styles that are high in autonomy and high in structure seemed to promote the highest student engagement. It is important to note that structure is not control. The

study refers to structure as, “the amount and clarity of information that teachers provide to students about expectations and ways of effectively achieving desired educational outcomes” in (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Skinner et al., 1998). The significance of the study for classroom practice is that teachers can implement instructional strategies that provide both autonomy support *along with* structure; they do not have to choose one over the other. The instructional strategies suggested in Reeve (2009), including nurturing student’s inner motivational resources, providing explanatory rationale, and using non-controlling language are also supported in this study in helping teachers become more autonomy supportive.

Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner (2004) suggest autonomy-support manifests in three distinct ways: “organizational autonomy support (e.g., allowing students some decision-making role in terms of classroom management issues), procedural autonomy support (e.g., offering students choices about the use of different media to present ideas), and cognitive autonomy support (e.g., affording opportunities for students to evaluate work from a self-referent standard).” The authors further argue that while organizational and procedural autonomy support may be necessary, overemphasis on the two types may result in “cognitive overload” in some students and can impede on their critical thinking process. This argument suggests, as does, Jang, Reeve & Deci (2010), that choices given to students have to be relevant to their goals and interests in order to enhance motivation and engagement in learning. The conclusion suggests that cognitive autonomy support may be the “salient feature” in promoting deeper motivation and sustainable engagement in learning.

Patall, Cooper, & Wynn (2010) investigation to determine the benefit of providing homework choices in classrooms, as well as, the importance of “students’ perception” of having choices in other areas of their learning activities showed that students’ motivation and engagement improved when provided choices, and that choice is an “important component” (but not the only component) in fostering an autonomous learning classroom. It appears from the study that even having the “perception” of choice was important in promoting “feelings of autonomy and motivation.” Although providing homework choices was beneficial to the students, the investigation also showed that different forms of autonomy support is necessary to enhance other dimensions of students motivations in learning; including “engaging in a task” simply because one considers it valuable and important, in line with Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner (2004). The result also agrees with Reeve (2009) in its view of how those different forms of autonomy support can be achieved in a classroom—taking the students’ perspective, and using non-controlling language, for example. Two prominent limitations to the study are the generalizability of the study to low-achieving students and experienced teachers (participants were high-achieving students, pre-service teachers), and the short duration of the intervention. Furthermore, the study recommends further investigation in how to reduce “burden placed on teachers” in providing/implementing choices in classrooms.

Evaluating the resources

Reeve (2009) articulately presented the differences between a teacher’s controlling and autonomy support motivating styles by defining each style, and providing examples of each style. In addition, the author provided seven explicit reasons why teachers adopt a controlling motivating style. I particularly liked (and agree with) his

assessment on how teachers, are “pressured” from above (administration, mandates), below (students), and within (personal beliefs), and how these “pressures” contribute to their reluctance in becoming autonomy supportive. He further offers specific strategies to help teachers become autonomy supportive, despite the pressures they face.

The answers to the eight teacher-generated questions in Reeve & Halusic (2009) are straightforward, with examples on how to implement autonomy support in the classroom. For example, to the questions, “What would I say? How might I talk?” the authors suggest using “non-controlling language”, and provide specific phrases, such as “I’ve noticed your work has slipped lately; do you know why that might be?” The study is relevant and the suggested solutions relatively simple to implement in a classroom.

The significance of Jang, Reeve, & Deci (2010) study is the implication that teachers do not have to forsake structure (thus create chaos) for autonomy; the integration of both can enhance students’ motivation and engagement in learning. The method was described in detail, and the results presented in various statistical tables. The participants included 133 teachers and 2,523 students from 9 public high schools in the Midwest, providing a generous sample size. The five raters in the study were “skilled”, and blind to the study’s purpose and hypotheses rated. Although one of the “potential methodological limitations” the authors note is the study’s generalizability to elementary and middle schools, for my purpose (research topic) this limitation does not apply.

Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner (2004) propose realistic examples illustrating the application of the three distinct types of autonomy support (organizational, procedural, cognitive). The study clearly conveys instructional strategies associated with each type of autonomy support using text and tables. Although the proposal was based

on previous literatures observing 5th and 6th grade classrooms, the essence of the study, offering students choices relevant to their goals and interests rather than meaningless choices enhanced students' motivation and engagement, is in line with the remainder of the articles in this review whose primary focus was on high school students.

In Patall, Cooper, & Wynn (2010), at first glance, choice in homework would not seem to provide a substantial study result in autonomy support but the authors did an excellent job in linking homework choice to autonomy support by first, establishing the significance of homework in terms of the amount of time high school students spent doing homework; i.e., how much of their *learning activity* occupied homework assignments, and then by arguing and offering results from prior studies, its importance in enhancing learning (understanding and retention). Methods and procedures are meticulously presented, along with statistical analysis tables. The authors clearly explain the limitations to the study and their recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

The purpose of conducting this review was to find a solution that can help teachers/schools create an environment that fosters students' autonomy, and thus enhance their motivation and engagement in learning. The articles selected for the review (collectively) provide sound and practical solutions, both hypothesized and proven practices, along with the limitations discovered, and suggestions for future research/study. Each study with its own perspective addresses all of my research questions, and provides me with leverage to initiate a productive conversation with potential stakeholders.

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