



# Self-Determination Theory

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## Abstract

Self-determination theory is a theory of motivation which posits that humans continually and actively seek challenges and new experiences to and develop and master. Within education, the theory considers that students are motivated to achieve different objectives. When a behavior is self-determined, the individual determines that the locus of control is internal to the self, whereas when the behavior is controlled, the locus of

control is external to self. The important distinction between the internal or external determinants is not in whether the behaviors are motivated or intentional, but in their internal regulatory processes and how the internal regulatory processes drive external behaviors (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

## Overview

Self-determination theory is a theory of motivation which posits that humans continually and actively seek challenges and new experiences to and develop and master. Within education, the theory considers that students are motivated to achieve different objectives. Unlike other motivational theories, self-determination theory offers the “distinction that falls within the class of behaviors that are intentional or motivated. These motivated actions are self-determined to the extent that they are endorsed by one’s sense of self” (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, p. 326). When a behavior is self-determined, the individual determines that the locus of control is internal to self, whereas when the behavior is controlled, the locus of control is external to self. The important distinction between the internal or external determinants is not in whether the behaviors are motivated or intentional, but in their internal regulatory processes and how the internal regulatory processes drive external behaviors. The qualities of the components of the behaviors are vastly different and need to be understood in order to promote self-determination in a classroom environment (Deci, et al., 1991, p. 327).

### The Building Blocks of Self-Determination

#### Intrinsic Motivation

The most self-determined type of behavior is intrinsic motivation. These behaviors are induced for their own sake, and are linked to feelings of pleasure, interest and satisfaction derived directly from participation in the behavior. Individuals that are intrinsically motivated engage in behaviors because of internal feelings of satisfaction derived from the behavior. While engaging in these behaviors, humans are self-regulated, interested in the activity, choosing to engage in the activity, and function without the aid of external rewards or constraints (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Thus, intrinsic behaviors are initiated because the individual chooses to engage in the activity according to their own wishes. When a

## Keywords

**Autonomy**

**Competence**

**Extrinsic Motivation**

**Goals**

**Intrinsic Motivation**

**Learner-Centered**

**Locus of Control**

**Self-Determination Theory**

child chooses a specific book to read and reads it just for the sake of enjoyment, this exemplifies intrinsic motivation.

### Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic behaviors are “instrumental in nature. They are not performed out of interest, but rather because they are believed to be instrumental” in producing a desired outcome. While research previously has indicated that extrinsic motivation is not a building block of self-determination, recent research has suggested that “these behavioral types differ in the extent to which they represent self-determined behaviors in contrast to a more controlled response. The determining factor that makes these behaviors more self-determined” rather than extrinsic is the factor of internalization (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, p. 328).

Internalization is a proactive process through which individuals transform their regulatory processes into internal processes (Schafer, 1968). In self-determination processes, internalization is viewed as a motivated process. Self-determination theorists report that they believe that (a) people are innately induced to internalize and integrate within themselves “the regulation of uninteresting activities that are useful for effective functioning in the social world” and (b) that the extent to which the process of internalization and integration proceeds effectively is a “function of the social context.” The four types of extrinsic motivation that can be integrated within the interpersonal framework include:

- External,
- Introjected,
- Identified,
- Integrated regulation (Deci, et al., 1991, p. 328).

### External Regulation

External regulation behaviors are “performed because of an external contingency, and are considered the loci of initiation and regulation. External regulation represents the least self-determined form of extrinsic motivation”. External regulation behaviors are

typically induced by the offer of reward or punishment. An individual displaying external regulation is an individual that might study just because they know they will be rewarded for doing well (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, p. 328).

### Identified Regulation

Identification is “the process of identifying with the value of an activity and accepting regulation of the activity as one’s own” (Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci, 2006, p. 21). When individuals value the personal relevance of an activity and willingly engage in the activity, then this represents a more significant form of internalization than other types of externalization. While behaviors resulting from identification are still extrinsic in nature, identified regulation occurs because of one’s own volition, which approximates intrinsic motivation. In this way, identification behavior integrates the two types of motivation into a composite behavior. An individual executing identification behavior may study a given subject despite personal difficulty or dislike; for example, because the student knows the subject is integral in fulfilling a self-selected goal (Vansteenkiste, Lens & Deci, 2006). While the student may express personal distaste for a specific area like statistics, the student realizes and understands the importance of the course of study in helping them achieve their goal.

### Integrated Regulation

In the case of integrated regulation, the behavior is fully integrated within the individual’s sense of self. These identifications are combined with the individual’s other sense of their values, needs, and identities. A student might have one view of self interpretation as a good student and the other as a good athlete. While these two self identities may seem conflicting and cause internal tensions for the student, the two can become integrated and dwell harmoniously within the person and with the students’ sense of self. When this internal harmony is realized then the integrated processes are completely self-willed and mainly occur in adult stages of development. Integrated regulation appears to be very similar to intrinsic motivation, because both integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation cause willing behaviors, develop creativity, and prosper understanding. However, intrinsic motivation is different than integrated regulation even though they seem similar in many ways (Deci, et al., 1991, p. 330).

## Applications

### Motivation in a Public School Setting

In a public school setting, self-determination, or “student-directed learning” involves teaching students multiple strategies that allow them to regulate and direct their own behavior (Agran, King-Sears, Wehmeyer, & Copeland, 2003). Student directed educational strategies are aimed at teaching students to set appropriate goals for themselves, self-monitor their own performances, identify solutions to present or future problems, verbally direct their own behaviors, reinforce their own behaviors, and evaluate their own performances (Agran, Hong, & Blankenship, 2007, p. 453). These are general strategies and outcomes that can be uti-

lized to create a student directed learning environment.

Research has suggested that teachers utilize a multitude of teaching strategies to create student directed “learner centered environments.” In learner-centered classrooms, teachers are attentive to issues surrounding children’s “cognitive and metacognitive development, the affective and motivational dimensions of instruction, the developmental and social aspects of learning, and individual differences in learning strategies that are in part, associated with children’s cultural and social backgrounds” (Daniels & Perry, 2003, p. 102). In learner centered classrooms, teachers provide several teaching practices that are motivational. Strategies that are used are numerous and include:

- Motivating students by providing a range of instructional activities relevant to children’s lives and differentiated according to an individual’s developmental needs;
- Frequently interacting with students to monitor development and progress and providing help as needed; and
- Creating positive relationships with children to address socio-emotional and developmental needs (p. 102).

Within this framework, the most important element of these learner centered strategies is the children’s perceptions of teacher strategies that they determine to be motivational.

In one interview, children of elementary school age indicated several strategies that promoted motivation in a learning environment. Children reported the desire to be known as a “unique person and learner.” Children also desired to be known as an individual and felt secure afterward. Eventually, as students matured, they reported feeling less reliant on teachers and more reliant on peers. Children reported the need to “participate in interesting learning activities.” Children expressed boredom with too many repetitive activities. Another factor children indicated was they “want to make their own choices...sometimes.” They reported feeling most empowered when they could make their own educational choices. Children also indicated the need to “work with classmates” and reported the desire to work collaboratively with their peers. All of these factors indicated that children’s perceptions of learner centered educational environments promoted student motivation, self-perceived competence, and achievement (Daniels & Perry, 2003, p. 106). The perceptions of children regarding their own learning hold several implications for how learning centered strategies can be applied in educational settings.

### Students

Rewards such as prizes and money have long been used to motivate students to promote success in school. However, research conducted thirty years ago demonstrated that students who participated in activities and received rewards tended to lose interest in and the willingness to work on the activity in the absence of rewards. Other research seeking to outline primary differences between internalization and intrinsic rewards, demonstrated that rewards for work consistently indicates that these behaviors seek to control behavior at an operational level, but also these behav-

iors “undermine intrinsic motivation for interesting tasks and impeded internalization of regulations for uninteresting tasks” (Deci, et al., 1991). Other “external events designed to motivate or control people including deadlines and competition were similarly determined to decrease intrinsic motivation” (Deci, et al., 1991, p. 335). All of these behaviors elicit external controls on behaviors. When an individual’s sense of autonomy is diminished, intrinsic motivation is decreased.

In response to students’ behaviors, teachers will also become more controlling over students that act fidgety and inattentive during a lesson. Based on this observation, students that appear to be more motivated and autonomous in school may elicit a greater amount of respect and support derived from the behavior of the student and the teacher’s assumptions regarding these indicators (Deci, et al., 1991, p. 341). In response to this research, it can be concluded that the most effective internalization and self-determined form of regulation will occur in students if

- Children are able to understand the value and application of a given activity;
- Are provided choices regarding the activity; and
- If their feelings and perspectives are acknowledged (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).

This research further implies that teachers have a deep responsibility for promoting these classroom structures.

### Teachers

Deci, Schwartz, et al. (1981) reasoned that some teachers were more supportive of student autonomy, while other teachers were more oriented toward controlling their students and their behaviors. Results from their study indicated that students in classrooms of teachers who supported student autonomy were more likely to demonstrate intrinsic motivation, academic competence, and self-esteem than students learning in classrooms of controlling teachers (Deci, et al., 1991, p. 337). Other studies have demonstrated that students in classrooms with supportive teachers were more likely to:

- Stay in school (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997),
- Experience enhanced creativity (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984),
- Develop a preference for optimal challenge (Shapira, 1976), and greater conceptual understanding (Benware & Deci, 1984, Grolnick & Ryan, 1987),
- Develop more positive emotionality (Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993),
- Possess higher academic intrinsic motivation (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981),
- Produce better academic performance (Boggiano, Flink, Shields, Seelbach, & Barrett, 1993), and
- Higher academic achievement (Flink, Boggiano, Main, Barrett & Katz, 1992).

These are strong indicators of the role of the teacher in providing academic structures that empower and motivate students' success.

Teachers can very easily fall into academic structures that disempower students and cause them to rely too heavily on the teacher for support and learning. From an observed standpoint, students that rely too heavily on their teachers for support are less apt to thrive in academic environments when teachers stylistically do not provide systematic control over all aspects of the learning environment. In other words, teachers that provide their students with an autonomous classroom setting are able to nurture more active learning from their students and promote student potential. This statement is supported by other research that demonstrated that a teacher's supportive style that respected and valued students, rather than neglected or frustrated them, nurtured high interest, motivation, and achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986).

### Administrators

Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, and Kaufmann (1982) indicated that when teachers feel pressured or controlled by their superiors regarding student outcomes, they were more likely to control their students. In studies conducted to determine the impact of teachers under pressure in contrast to less control, evidence indicated "that when teachers were more controlling of students, students performed less well in problem-solving activities, both during instruction" (Deci, et al., 1991, p. 340) and subsequent to the instruction. Pressure from administrators to ensure student controls directly related to the autonomy and support provided by teachers to students (Deci, et al., 1991). Central to these administrative controls, other controls included mandates made by "government agencies, parent groups, and other forces outside of the school system also produced a negative impact on students' self determination, conceptual learning, and personal adjustment" (p. 340). Maehr (1991) determined that classroom practices are dictated in large part by school policies. Administrators certainly should be aware of their role in creating a school environment that nurtures the child's frame of reference. Specific supports for self-determination includes offering some choices, minimizing harsh controls, acknowledging feelings, and making information available for decision making and for performing target tasks.

### Promoting Self Determination in Children

Professional development that supports teachers in better understanding learning through a child's lens is vital to enabling educational professionals to structure learning environments that are child centered. The relationships between administrators, parents, and teachers are also central to understanding the needs of the child. It is recommended practice in the learner-centered educational environment that "talking with children's parents can often fill in the gaps concerning children's learning interests and experiences outside school" (Daniels & Perry, 2003, p. 106). Furthermore, collecting background information and knowledge about individual children is "necessary" for providing meaningful and appropriately challenging activities that

will enable children to be the most successful in their academic endeavors. These opportunities factor heavily in creating and honoring a "system of diversity" and enable differentiated learning for individual student needs while supporting teachers in diverse educational environments. Utilizing these strategies and understanding the needs of the child are the first indicators of educational environments designed to promote self-determination in children (Daniels & Perry, 2003).

## Conclusion

Teachers must understand self-determination theory and use ways of teaching students that are intrinsically motivating to prosper academic success for children. Schools have changed dramatically over the last thirty years in the way discipline is approached and in how relationships among students, teachers, administrators, and parents are structured.

For new teachers entering an educational setting, unfamiliar with the curricula mandates of a given school and the students, offering students choices about their learning, building relationships with parents, and supporting students to develop a deep understanding of themselves as learners are central to gaining insight into the framework of the learner-centered classroom. To learn new curricula in a given grade level takes approximately one year to explore. When teachers realize the choices within given curricula and allow students the opportunity to co-explore, it simply creates less work for the new teacher, because this system allows the students a good share of the responsibility for their own learning.

New teachers are often caught up in creating much of their own curriculum, comprehension questions, and paper-and-pencil activities that could be alleviated by giving students more choices. To further ensure classroom successes, new teachers need to communicate their goals with others, including parents. After all, when students are placed in charge of much of their own learning the responsibility for success becomes shared and places more accountability on all parties, in turn easing teachers from carrying the whole burden for students' success.

## Terms & Concepts

**Autonomy:** Autonomy in a learning environment can be described as possessing the independent ability to make an academic choice and act on that choice.

**Competence:** Competence in a learning environment can be described as doing an activity well or to a required standard.

**Extrinsic Motivation:** Extrinsic motivation can be ascribed to behaviors that are performed out to avoid risk or seek reward. Behaviors that occur as a result of extrinsic motivation are not performed because of an individual's deep interest, but are performed because they are believed to be instrumental in producing a desired outcome.

**Intrinsic Motivation:** Intrinsic motivation can be described

ascribed to behaviors that are performed because of the internal desire and regulation of the individual performing the behavior. These are behaviors that elicit joy and pleasure to the individual without external regulators promoting the behavior.

**Self-Determination Theory:** A theory of motivation which posits that humans continually and actively seek challenges and new experiences to and develop and master. Within education, the theory considers that students are motivated to achieve different objectives.

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