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# "Combating Student Apathy: Helping Teachers Create Autonomy-Supportive Classrooms That Foster Motivation And Higher Achievement"

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COMBATING STUDENT APATHY: HELPING TEACHERS CREATE  
AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE CLASSROOMS THAT FOSTER MOTIVATION AND  
HIGHER ACHIEVEMENT

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Education.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Students often struggle meeting the requirements of an increasingly demanding educational experience. They are expected to arrive to school well rested, sit in numerous classrooms for up to an hour each, be engaged and attentive, and perhaps more notably, take standardized tests that determine their academic performance, particularly at the secondary level, which assigns them a percentile ranking comparing them to their peers. The pressures of school are undoubtedly more today than in previous generations. It is no wonder then, that many American students who struggle are often struggling due to a lack of motivation. Extrinsic academic pressures placed on students by parents or teachers work for some students, but for others, constant pressures to perform, little observed validity of classroom content in applications to their lives, and subsequent marginalization by a system that teaches to the test they are measured by, creates a perfect storm of unmotivating factors.

Recently, my colleagues and I have observed students struggling in classrooms and have begun working on ways to uncover more information about the lack of student motivation in our school. Although not universal, I have recognized that because students struggle to see connections between classroom activities and their lives. In education, this is an essential element of student achievement. Part of the reason this seems to occur is that choice and general inquisitiveness is missing from lessons - things that could help increase perceived connectedness of learning materials to students' lives, and therefore,

increasing motivation. This thought process eventually lead me to my research question, *“How does providing students with autonomy-supportive instruction strategies and choice impact motivation to learn within the classroom?”*. By focusing in on an element that allows students to have more of a voice in their education, there would seem to be increasing feelings of ownership among them. In this chapter, I will attempt to explain the thought process behind the development of my focus question and how student motivation, self-efficacy, identity, and autonomy within the classroom all can combine to explain what the education field can do to engage students.

### **Journey of Inquiry**

Over the last few years, there has been much talk within my PLC (professional learning community) about seemingly increasing levels of amotivation among students. In my own school, we have observed increases in student missing work, fluctuating assessment scores, and seen reading levels among struggling students continue to be 2-3 grade-levels below students’ actual grade. Of course, there are multiple factors at play here but all of this information has lead to discussions among my PLC to find out more and dig deeper into possible explanations in order to address the issue.

During the conversations that took place after our initial realizations of the problem, many of our staff pointed towards our culture as a school, and how we approach teaching, especially towards students who are struggling. This later evolved into having discussions on gathering more information from students and eventually coming up with an action plan. After some informal questioning during parent-teacher conferences with students who were struggling, teachers reported in our follow up conversations that

struggling students pointed to lacking motivation for a variety of reasons. The fact that many struggling students lack motivation points to a larger point - if students are not motivated, how do we expect them to perform academically? Common responses from students suggest were that they did not see curriculum as being important or applicable to their lives, or that they did not feel confident in the material. With this information, we started to understand how students can perceive themselves within the school setting, and how that can have negative effects in motivation. Upon reviewing the soft data gathered through teacher-student conversations, major questions emerged including, “How do we find out more?” and “How can we help bridge the gap for these students to foster motivation?”. One common reply was to follow through with additional data gathering. It was at this point that I found myself building on my curiosities regarding student motivation.

Of the beginning understandings our PLC volunteer group, the most significant one was that students were not connecting with lessons because they did not see value or application to their lives. About a month after this meeting, I was further inspired upon reading *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units* in a Hamline University course I was taking at the time. In this book, Wiggins and McTighe (2005) explain how the structure of lessons can help students see purpose in classroom lessons, which they go on to say is widely recognized to be beneficial for higher learning outcomes. They also happened to touch on something that I had attempted to try periodically in my 8th grade classes -- more inquiry-based learning and student choice connected with specific themes and learning objectives. After having created an

Understanding by Design (UbD) lesson as part of the class, I saw possible connections to student motivation. With more intentional framing of lessons where purpose and goal were clear, and students were aware of supports provided to meet these, student engagement and learning increased. This is when I started asking myself more questions relating to student choice and connections with learning tasks. The thought process eventually lead me to ask the my final research question, *“How and to what extent does providing students with choice impact motivation to learn within the classroom?”*. Of course, more information must be found and used to develop a clearer concept of how motivation is influenced in the classroom.

In order to help answer this question, I realized much needed to be done to further pinpoint how much of a role student motivation is impacted by personal connection to learning tasks. In addition, I became curious about whether or not student choice in learning tasks can help bridge the disconnect that exists between students and content being taught. On top of inquiry into these questions, I wanted to place an importance on students, educators, and families as part of the learning process. In other words, resources will be needed to fully understand the impact of student choice and motivation, and educators along with families are a significant resource to tap into in order to gain an understanding of the macro-level issues that might play into student motivation.

### **Stakeholders**

By the nature of this project and its central question, students are the primary focus of the project. However, students are not the only stakeholders to be influenced by potential motivational strategies or included in the process of gaining understanding and



implementing changes. Parents, teachers, and the larger community are all important stakeholders in the process. All have integral parts to a holistic approach of understanding motivations of students, and how they can be ignited in the learning process. All stakeholders are to gain from increased student motivation, thus, all stakeholders are necessary contributors to give this approach credence and success.

In answering the research question, students have the most to gain from additional student choice. With increased choice, it is possible for students to be more autonomous in navigating through their educational career. While not the only person giving input, they can be more active in choosing what to learn about based on how they connect with it. Recently, I had an end-of-unit project where students had to write an essay on a choice of one of three essay prompts that directly met learning goals. In addition, they could choose an additional topic related to learning goals expressed in class, but through displaying their learning in one of 3 ways; 1. visual project (i.e. Google Slides, Explain Everything video, political cartoon etc.), 2. audio (music playlist with reflection essay explaining connections to themes learned in class), or 3. an acting performance. By providing pathways towards more autonomy in class, students became more engaged and feedback of this learning style was mostly positive.

After creating a rubric for both parts of the final project and explaining it to students, many of the struggling students had displayed increased levels of engagement, and were more excited about learning and *showing* their learning than ever before. One student in particular approached me and asked if he could write his own song about Gandhi's nonviolent protest movements. Naturally, I was curious and agreed as long as

they met the requirements for the assignment. Another student approached me and asked to make *two* videos focusing on women's roles in the quest for Indian independence. Middle school students asking to do more work is something that had never happened in my classes before, so I was very surprised and hopeful in that moment.

Upon turning in their final projects, many students who were struggling academically and seemed uninterested in material earlier in the year were asking to share with the class. In several classes, we displayed projects in sort of an art gallery form, where students walked around viewing and listening to each other's work. Although there were some students who still struggled to finish their projects, I was able to see the energy students put into creating projects that they chose to do instead of being directed what and how to display by their teacher. Seeing students value and take pride in their learning was something that further inspired me to analyze what motivated students. Even though students are central to this project, they are not the only stakeholders.

In addition to students, teachers are also an essential part of the process. Without guidance and clear instruction, students can feel lost in a maze of choices. Recently, my colleagues and I conducted a voluntary survey that demonstrated how important it is for teachers to be diligent and purposeful with instruction. In a quick exit survey of the choice final project my students completed, they were asked if they preferred unrestricted choice or choice based on teacher provided themes. An overwhelming majority of students chose the latter. It is important for teachers to arrive at an understanding that they need to avoid making choices too broad and guide students to learn more about things that interest them relating to class curriculum. With guidance, teachers are the

navigators of the cockpit rather than the pilot. They provide choices and help students reach clear, outlined goals in the process of learning.

Lastly, there is the family and larger community who are also stakeholders. Although some may argue that the family should not be involved in choosing what students are interested in, they are very much a part of who students are, and what/who they identify with. They also play a significant role in supporting students in goal setting and perseverance. It is because of this relationship that if student motivation is to be improved, families need to be a part of the process. Larger community networks can provide students with avenues to explore interests and see real-life applications of classroom content or themes. Seeing examples of what can be applied to the real world might further cement the importance of lessons in students' minds. Supporting these lessons could come from field trips to a laboratory or music studio where students can experience an interest. Another way to support this would be through exposure to thought processes and applications. Showing a student the value in GIS (geographic information systems) in analyzing where to build a hospital for instance, might allow them to make connections between school and their community. It then becomes a reciprocal relationship where community members can engage in the education process, and in return are receiving students more motivated to solve problems communities across the world face.

## Summary

Students in today's world face a growing list of demands when it comes to education. Expectations to perform in an increasingly competitive world are rising, while a disconnect between curriculum and motivation seems to be widening. To bridge this gap, students must see value in learning tasks and take ownership of their scholarship. A potential fix to this problem is providing students with more choice along with clearer visions for connecting learning to larger understandings and applications within students' lives. With the help of teachers providing clearer paths to making these connections by providing these choices, motivation is bound to be impacted. The question is, *how much?* In chapter two, findings on past and current research explaining this connection between student choice and motivation will be revealed and analyzed. Subsequent chapters will address current literature on student motivation, along with a description of a project to implement findings to help educators address motivation in schools, along with a concluding chapter reviewing the entirety of the project.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

Student apathy towards learning tasks and education in general seems to be an increasingly recognized phenomenon (Cheon & Reeve, 2015; Gillet, Vallerand, & Lafrenière, 2012; Denton, 2005). Students are expected to sit in classrooms throughout the school day learning in a variety of learning environments, through varied teaching styles, and with a wide range of resources that may or may not support their growth. On top of this, students are expected to take standardized tests where they are compared with their peers and lumped into statistics that may reinforce negative perceptions of education -- or worse yet, negative perceptions of themselves as learners (Cheon & Reeve, 2015). It is little wonder that many students feel detached from school, and associate it with negative emotions rather than positive ones. This unfortunate reality then begs the question: *How does providing students with autonomy-supportive instruction strategies and choice impact motivation to learn within the classroom?* The purpose of this chapter is to uncover details surrounding student perceptions by looking through the lense of self-determination theory (SDT) along with how motivation and student engagement can both be influenced, increased and how they continue to be determining factors in student achievement and growth.

### Self-Determination Theory

Researchers have increasingly begun to look at student motivation and engagement through the lense of self-determination theory. At the center of this theory is

the stipulation that three essential human psychological needs: the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy need to be met in order for individuals to feel motivated (Kats & Assor, 2012). Unlike other motivational theories, self-determination theory distinguishes between behaviors that are intended or motivated. Deci and Ryan (1991) make a distinction between “self-determined and controlled types of intentional regulation” (p. 326). They continue by explaining, “Motivated actions are self-determined to the extent that they are engaged in wholly volitionally and endorsed by one’s sense of self, whereas actions are controlled if they are compelled by some interpersonal or intrapsychic force” (Deci & Ryan, 1991, p.326). This distinction between self-determined actions and controlled actions are what make self-determination theory an often studied lens in which to view learning processes. In the research that has been conducted where students are supported in all three categories, results indicate that, students are more likely to persevere even when tasks increase in difficulty (Turner, 1995). In addition, supported students generally set intrinsically motivated goals (Turner, 1995). The evidence that researchers have gathered by analyzing the learning process from this theory has led to deeper understandings of how students can be supported to best foster persistence in learning, and the development of intrinsic rather than solely extrinsic motivation.

### **Needs of Autonomy**

According to self-determination theory, motivation to complete actions is influenced by environmental and social contexts through three basic psychological needs:

autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, Ryan, 1985; Deci, Ryan 2000). The first of these basic human psychological needs (autonomy) can be defined as the need to feel a sense of control and choicefulness regarding one's actions and goals, a feeling that occurs when one's actions and goals are recognized as coming from one's independent and authentic self (Blackwell, 1974). As Assor (2012) states, autonomy can be divided into two main contributing factors, "a) having optional choice; b) the motivation to form and realize authentic and direction giving values, goals and interests" (p. 437). Research regarding the three psychological needs paints a somewhat differing picture on approaches and categorization or division of said needs, but research has generally gathered a focus around Autonomy. In the years since self-determination theory came to be, research has shown that when teachers provide their students with high degrees of autonomy support for their students, they are more likely to, "...be able to explain the relevance of learning activities, create student-centered atmospheres, encourage student initiative, inquire about students' desires and needs, and attempt to understand students' emotional states" (Marshik, Ashton & Algina, 2017, p. 41). This sentiment is echoed by other researchers, who have determined that teachers who are autonomy-supportive in their classrooms exhibit teaching styles that facilitate learning in a more open environment. Autonomy-supportive teachers do this by recognizing students as individuals, by understanding their personalities, and by creating opportunities for students to have their preferences and needs guide learning and growth (Marshik et al., 2017). In contrast to more autonomy-supportive teachers, controlling teachers instead interject during learning, and interrupt the relationship between students' authentic

motives and classroom learning. The reasoning for some teachers interfering according to Reeve (2004) is because they, "...tend to make salient a teacher-constructed instructional agenda that defines what students should think, feel, and do" (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004, p. 148).

In addition to providing educators with answers about what autonomy-supportive classrooms are and what attributes teachers exhibit that can be defined as being "autonomy-supportive" teachers, research has also revealed that students who are exposed to autonomy-supportive contexts have higher levels of intrinsic motivation and well-being (Katz & Assor, 2007). This intrinsic motivation is something that researchers have continued to look into because of known connections to continued growth. In a 2004 study researchers conducted on the effects of autonomy-supportive strategies, they found that when teachers used intrinsic goals for framing learning activities and provided autonomy-supportive learning environments, student dedication and engagement increased (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, & Deci, 2004). In addition to this, other researchers suggest that providing students with autonomy supportive strategies results in more positive learning behaviors and skills on students' own initiatives (Blackwell 1974).

**Locus of causality (external and internal pressures).** Part of supporting autonomy in the classroom is providing individual students with opportunities to feel like they are in control, and that their decisions are coming from their authentic self (Katz & Assor, 2007). With research conducted from the self-determination theory, researchers have applied this range from being self-determined (in control of one's motivation and actions) to being controlled as the locus of causality (Deci et al. 1991, p. 327). It is this



locus of causality that has allowed researchers to better understand the variations of student motivation. What researchers studying this theory by using the locus of causality have revealed, is that students who have teachers who are controlling and work to manipulate behavior or coerce students into behaving a certain way are more likely to have students who are less engaged (Patall et al., 2017). Katz & Assor (2007) state, “...that when people are pressured and coerced (from outside or within) to behave in specific ways, they experience frustration... [which] undermine(s) engagement...” (p. 243). To further emphasize this point, additional research suggests that in order to ensure students feel like they are self-determined, teachers must “...provide a relevant rationale for the task, and offer choice by allowing students to participate in task and goal selection and to choose their work methods and mode of evaluation of their work. Such teachers also allow criticism and some expression of negative feelings” (Alfi et al., 2004; Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Reeve et al., 2004; Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCinto, & Turner, 2004). Despite the research findings pointing to the locus of causality as being a significant factor in student motivation, and that students attain positive outcomes when they have more autonomy, teachers tend to move toward a more controlling motivating style, which has been identified through said research as leading to lesser academic outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002; Reese, 2014).

**Supporting autonomy through choice.** Student choice in classrooms is a natural step many educators take in moving away from traditional top-down directives towards more autonomous and independent learning. One would naturally assume that given choices, students would be more motivated to learn, more engaged in the learning process

and thus, more successful. As Denton (2005) states, “When students make choices about what and/or how they learn they become more motivated to learn” (p. 4). Incorporating choice into the classroom, although seemingly simplistic in theory, is more than it nominatively suggests. Simply providing students with options and expecting unhindered growth has been shown to be ineffective (Assor, Kaplan & Roth, 2002). Choice can be supported in the classroom in multiple ways: procedurally (encouraging student ownership of learning formats), organizationally (encouraging student ownership of environment), and cognitively (encouraging student ownership of developing learning paths) (Stefanou et al., 2004). Although providing students with choices has been proven to have a direct impact in student learning outcomes in some cases, a growing number of studies raise questions about these findings.

In past studies, researchers have found that providing students with choices in their own learning have had positive effects on student engagement and learning (Iyengar, & Lepper, 1999). In past studies, researchers have found that providing students with choices in their own learning have had positive effects on student engagement and learning; however, more recent studies suggest the answer is not straight forward, but rather more nuanced than previously thought (Katz & Assor, 2007). The concern among researchers now is that confusion and ambiguity regarding student choice might stifle progress in education, as Katz & Assor (2007) suggest may cause teachers to abandon choice altogether. This concern is not unfounded. As one study suggest, boundaries exist where student choice is successful in engagement and learning and when it is not (Katz & Assor, 2007). It is therefore, beneficial to take a deeper look at what elements of

student choice are beneficial, and at what point does providing student choice contradict meaningful intentions.

**Previous models of choice.** The idea of providing students with choices appears in multiple motivational frameworks. The expectancy-value model of achievement motivation narrows in on social-psychological influences on choice and persistence (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, 2000). This theory states that people's choices are influenced by perceptions on whether positive or negative task characteristics are inherent, which are then associated with cost and benefits (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Many would recognize this process as cost-benefit analysis. The theory behind this is that when a choice is made, other choices are eliminated in the process (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Based on this model, choice is an "outcome of the motivational process and depends on the students' task-value beliefs and expectations of success" (Katz & Assor, 2007, p.430). In essence, students choose the option they think will result in their success. Choice is not the motivation, but rather an outcome of student motivation.

Other models build off of the expectancy-value model of Eccles and Wigfield (1992, 1995, 2000). Bandura (1997), states that individuals' self-efficacy is "the major determinant of goal-setting, choice activity, willingness to expend effort, and persistence" (Katz & Assor, 2007, p. 430). The process of choosing in this model is a result of three major factors: personality, behavior, and the environment in which a person learns. This in essence, creates a domino effect which influences student choice (Katz & Assor, 2007). For example, a teacher that fosters a caring and empathetic classroom

environment can influence the environment, which can then lead to students and teachers exhibiting in more empathetic behaviors. In doing so, this will lead to students recognizing and valuing each others' personal traits. More recently however, researchers have shifted away from outcome models to a model that holds choice as a part of, rather than an outcome of the motivation process (Katz & Assor, 2007).

**Contemporary theories.** More recent studies have brought a focus in on the self-determination theory (SDT), which looks at choice not as a motivational outcome, but as part of the motivation process itself (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-determination theory depends on three fundamental psychological human needs that are central to adaptive functioning: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Assor, Deci & Ryan, Patall). One of these human needs is autonomy, or the experience that behavior is self-directed and determined (Patall et al., 2010, 2017). This idea of autonomy as being a human need is in opposition to previous and existing models of learning where learning is viewed as being a teacher-lead directive towards learning on account of feelings of obligation because of the lack of choice (Patall et al., 2017). In an increasingly globalized world where 21st century skills revolve around problem-solving and interpersonal skills, these models, which are driven by external forces (teacher-directives) are put into question. Instead, research suggests supporting autonomy among students because it is associated with “engagement, well-being, and highly desirable [intrinsic] motivation” (Patall et al., 2017, p. 270). These findings are not new. Scholars have continued to look at choice itself as a way to increase student autonomy and motivation. In a 1975 study, students were found to be more likely to solve interpersonal problems through

independent discussion and reasoning (Allman-Snyder, 1975). Another study suggested that students who were given “regular opportunities to make academic choices were also more likely to accept a wider range of classmates as friends than were students who did not have regular opportunities to make academic choices” (Denton, 2010, p. 209). With these findings, it is with increasing clarity that teachers who provide autonomy supports and choice within classrooms provide more than benefits to students beyond strictly academic performance.

**Providing choice for students.** Being one of the fundamental psychological human needs, autonomy holds a high importance for teachers to understand, foster, and grow within their classrooms. According to SDT, the need for autonomy refers to the need to feel a sense of “full volition and choicefulness regarding one’s activities and goals, [something] that emerges when one’s actions and goals are experienced as emanating from one’s authentic self” (Katz & Assor, 2007). This reinforces the idea that a significant part of the learning process is the ability for students to be self-directed and intrinsically motivated. An essential element of fostering intrinsic motivation in learning is to provide students with a degree of autonomy within the classroom. The problem that educators have encountered when implementing this is that various approaches to fostering student autonomy within the classroom have been met with mixed results. No one teacher implements choice in the same way, has the same student demographics, organizational structure, or even their own autonomy as a professional (Marshik et al., 2017). This creates challenges when implementing autonomy support within the

classroom, which might be scaring teachers away from the process altogether (Katz & Assor, 2007).

Despite differences that exist within education, research suggests that teachers who “provide a high autonomy support for their students are more likely than those who provide low autonomy support to explain the relevance of learning activities, create student-centered atmospheres, encourage student initiative, inquire about students’ desires and needs, and attempt to understand students’ emotional states” (Marchik et al., 2017, p. 41). In addition to being more student-centered, teachers who provide high autonomy support have higher degrees of student motivation within the classroom. For teachers to be moving in the direction of having stronger supports of student autonomy, research suggests developing a clear understanding of the different types of autonomy. Stefanou et al. (2004) make the claim that there are three major types of autonomy: cognitive, procedural, and organizational. Cognitive autonomy support requires teachers to encourage students to think for themselves, problem solve, and sustain their own learning; procedural autonomy support requires teachers to develop ownership of learning formats; and organizational autonomy support requires teachers to encourage student ownership of the actual learning environment. Although these different types of autonomy exist, research points to cognitive autonomy as being of higher importance. According to Marshik et al. (2017) “Researchers have suggested that cognitive autonomy support may be the most beneficial given its role in fostering students’ psychological engagement and deep-level processing” (p. 42).

“[Students] are more likely to incorporate the use of positive learning behaviors and skills at their own initiative than they are when they don’t have choices” (Blackwell 1974, Rice, Linn 78)

*When choice is counterproductive.* Although some research suggests a general positive correlation between student choice and student benefits, research continues to uncover the nuances behind this past body of research. One of the most common findings in research is that when teachers provide too much choice, students are actually negatively impacted. An environment that provides these numerous choices and elicits thought of multiple characteristics is referred to as a “complex decision-making environment” (Payne, 1976). In this environment, students are essentially overwhelmed with choices that are provided and what was provided with all positive intentions, results in user frustration. As Katz & Assor (2007) explain, “When options become more complex...children tend to respond by using the less complex strategies characteristic of younger children, and even resort to random selection without consideration of the options” (p. 434). This finding has been echoed by other researchers who suggest that most people tend to select tasks of intermediate difficulty that gives them the most feedback about their capabilities and provides information that may increase their sense of competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). This suggests that a “goldilocks principle” exists when it comes to choice. If there are options that are too difficult or easy, they are not competence-supporting, and therefore unmotivating to students.

**Motivation and engagement.** Motivation and engagement are two essential elements of education but are complementary instead of synonymous terms. Motivation can be defined as being people's intentions to perform particular actions. According to Assor (2012), motivation can be divided into two separate attributes: a) intensity (strength), and b) phenomenological quality. The intensity attribute refers to the effort that is placed in actions, whereas the quality attribute refers people's perceptions of the source of their intentions. This distinction between motivation attributes helps explain how simply providing choice to students is not enough. Despite providing students with choice, it is possible to have students who have a lesser-degree of motivation. As Assor (2012) states, "...Two students may intend to invest a great deal of effort in a school assignment...However the quality of the motivation may be high for the student who perceives the assignment as something she/he would authentically want to do" (p.422). Motivation in this sense, can be different based on a series of internal and external factors (Assor, 2012). Engagement can be defined as the amount and quality of actions made by individuals in pursuit of a particular goal (Assor, 2012). As a result of the importance of both motivation and engagement, researchers have spent significant time trying to understand both.

Engagement has been determined to play an important role in the learning process. When students are in school, "Engagement is important because it functions as a behavioral pathway by which students' motivational process contribute to their subsequent learning and development" (Reeve, et al., 2004, p. 148). Without engagement, student learning would be negatively impacted because of the reciprocal relationship that



exists between the two. Some researchers go as far as saying that engagement is so important that it provides a window into the lives of students. As these researchers point out, engagement can predict students achievement (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998) and even the odds of graduation from high school (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994). The importance of engagement as research suggests, is not that it just provides educators with statistics and predictions on graduation rates, but it is essential for educators because it “reveals underlying motivation” (Reeve et al. 2004).

***Amotivation.*** The opposite of being motivated, or the willingness to perform actions is amotivation. It is a state where students hold little to no motive to invest in learning tasks, which therefore results in disengaged and underperforming students (Cheon & Reeve, 2015). When students are amotivated, they tend to sit passively in class rather than actively participate in the learning process. As Cheon & Reeve (2015) point out, “Early empirical work on amotivation construct conceptualized it as a one-dimensional phenomenon that represented the absence of any intentionality toward action” (p. 99). Research now suggests that amotivation involves more variables, and can not be explained without applying the self-determination theory, which contrasted amotivation with autonomous motivation and controlled motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this more applicable theory, motivations were divided among sources for expending effort on given tasks. Autonomous motivation for example, is represented by “behavioral intentions rooted in wanting to act out of interest and enjoyment (intrinsic motivation) or a sense of value and importance (identified regulation)” (Cheon & Reeve, 2015, p. 100). In contrast, controlled motivation is “characterized by high levels of

external regulation and introjected regulation” (Cheon & Reeve, 2015, p.100). In controlled motivation, individuals are motivated by outside forces such as unwanted punishments or desired rewards or to appease internal demands such as perfectionism (Cheon & Reeve, 2015).

Although numerous researchers have attempted to uncover the differences between the types of motivation, more researchers have begun uncovering reasoning behind amotivation. Researchers have argued that a one-dimensional concept of motivation lacks detail in understanding the deficits students exhibit during various states of amotivation. Amotivation-low ability represents the perception that one lacks the ability to perform a learning task. This can be described as the feeling of helplessness students exhibit when they feel their knowledge or skills do not match match up with the task at hand. Another state of amotivation is amotivation-low effort, which represents the feeling of lack of energy to be used towards a learning task. This is sometimes referred to as general apathy towards a learning task, where individuals might not feel expending energy on a given task is worth it. For the third type of amotivation, there is amotivation-low value, which is a lack of value placed on the task. This is where students place lesser importance on learning tasks due to their own interpretation of the task at hand. Lastly, there is amotivation-unappealing tasks, which can be described as a lack of interest in the task because the task itself is unappealing. Generally speaking, this is when students feel like the task itself is unmotivating or emotionally/physically painful or debilitating (Cheon, Reeve, Lee & Lee, 2018).

***Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation.*** Research conducted in the past century has revealed that rewards can control behavior (Skinner, 1953). However, research conducted in the later half of the 20th century has concluded that activities or actions themselves can serve as rewards, which has introduced an additional focus to external rewards (Deci, Ashton & Algina, 1999). Deci (1971) referred to these activities that served as motivators themselves as intrinsically motivated activities, which has led to research uncovering more about the effects of intrinsic motivation. Research conducted by Deci (1971, 1972) revealed that external rewards could negatively impact student intrinsic motivations for learning activities. Subsequent studies echoed this finding, demonstrating that other external rewards (both symbolic and material) could negatively affect student intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999). Later researchers conducted studies exploring the various questions surrounding external rewards and events and their effects on intrinsic motivation. In their approaches, they explored external events such as threats, deadlines, competition, and choice (Deci et al., 1999). In these later studies, evidence of external rewards or events having an undermining effect has been mixed or inconclusive, but there are many motivational and cognitive theorists that acknowledge there is a relationship between external events and intrinsic motivation (Deci et al. 1999).

***Intrinsic motivation theories.*** The generally inconclusive understanding resulting from older studies eventually led to investigators looking in to other categories with the intentions of uncovering the connections between external events and intrinsic motivation. In this process, researchers have looked into categories such as attributional, behavioral, and cognitive-behavioral theories (Deci et al. 1999). One attributional

approach explains this link between external rewards and intrinsic motivation as one that is based off of people developing social schemas about usage of external or extrinsic incentives designed to, in some form, manipulate or influence behaviors (Deci et al, 1999). For example, students “...might develop the generalization “When people give me rewards so that I will do a task, the task is probably boring”” (Deci et al, 1999). Other theories such as Dickinson (1989) and Bernstein (1990) and Eisenberger and Cameron (1996) analyze this relationship and approach it differently - through the lense of behavior instead of attributes. In these studies, Eisenberger and Cameron (1996) shed light on types of rewards and whether they are tied to the quality of performance or not. In their findings, they suggest that if people learn they are going to receive rewards regardless of quality, they become helpless. However, when rewards are dependent on quality of performance, the effort expended increases.

### **Summary**

This chapter is a review of current and past literature in order to give a comprehensive and in-depth understanding needed to answer the question: *How does providing students with autonomy-supportive instruction strategies and choice impact motivation to learn within the classroom?* This review attempts to uncover the details surrounding this question by first focusing on self-determination theory (SDT) as the current research behind this theory and how it plays a central role in explaining how students are motivated. Through this SDT lense, research suggests that teachers can be particularly effective in creating motivated and engaged students by knowing them as individuals, and providing an autonomy-supportive classroom, where students perceive

the locus of causality as originating from within their authentic selves. In addition to having students that are more self-determined, this chapter also discusses research surrounding the notion of providing students with more choice in learning. Through this focus, research suggests that simply providing choices to students is not enough to reinforce or increase individual motivations. Contemporary research discussed in this chapter instead, points to findings which state that providing students with some choices, or to an extent where they perceive that they can choose a learning task or activity resonates, and assists in increasing motivation. In addition to increasing motivation, this chapter specifies the benefits of intrinsic motivation and how teachers who frame instruction using intrinsic motivation have students who are more self-reliant.

The content of this chapter may be used to better understand motivational struggles and plan curriculum and best practices for students who seem apathetic towards education and learning, but more importantly to increase engagement through viewing students through an individual basis. In the next chapter, a methodology for this process of engaging and motivating students to learn will be explained.

## CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Introduction

This project is designed to address the question, *How does providing students with autonomy-supportive instruction strategies and choice impact motivation to learn within the classroom?* This is a more refined variation of a major question of mine since I first started teaching in 2013. After having multiple professional conversations regarding student apathy towards education, I chose to uncover possible reasons why so many students are disengaged and in some cases, seem unwilling to learn. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a preview of the project. In addition, the chapter will work to provide a rationale for selecting the format of a website as a way of distributing findings more efficiently and effectively.

### Project Overview

The overarching goal of this project is to provide teachers with a resource that contains a host of materials to better understand student motivation, and what they can do to foster engagement and continued motivational growth within their classrooms. As teachers continue to see increasing instances of amotivation among their students, my project will serve to help them identify possible reasons why amotivation exists within their student population, and how to most effectively address it using best practices. The reason why I decided to choose a website format was because I feel a website provides

the best platform for teachers to access information, visualize existing realities, and create or conceptualize possible solutions. Part of this process is to work on developing a website that is reflective of the goal in mind - fostering student motivation.

I knew going into the web-making process was going to be somewhat familiar because I had made simple websites before. However, I was truly unsure of how to give such complex and nuanced information to teachers in a way that was respectful of their time, but efficient in providing them with tools they could apply quickly. Knowing this, I made a concerted effort to provide a general framework with resources to get teachers thinking about motivation as a goal within their classroom environments instead of just an outcome.

In addition to being a more conducive to learning these complex and nuanced concepts, I viewed a website as being an effective way to transmit a growing research field, which contains a lot of information, in an easy-to-use format. Having this information centrally located on a website will help teachers to pull significant aspects of current and past research, and formulate action plans to implement autonomy-supportive strategies within their classrooms. Having a one-stop resource will serve to help these teachers gain quick insights into amotivation, and help create additional conversations in their PLCs.

### **Learning Theories**

The theory that will be used as a lense throughout this project will be the self-determination theory (SDT). This theory breaks down student motivation down to

three essential psychological needs: autonomy support, competence, and relatedness. All needs serve to create students' personalities and motivational tendencies. In addition to this learning theory as the basis for analyzing pedagogical approaches, there will also be strong elements of inquiry-based learning strategies that will be included in a framework in which to best support students development into self-determining (autonomous) individuals.

### **Frameworks**

The main organizational framework for this project will be a website created using Google Sites, which provides a steady platform to display research and provide resources to teachers and other support groups such as parents and larger families. In essence, the framework for this project is to provide these support groups with a resource to better understand student amotivation, and how to work on fostering motivation skills in their own students. It is planned to be a multi-tiered system that focuses on existing realities among many students when it comes to disconnectedness with education. This off branch of the main theme of motivation and choice will include, but not be limited to topics of emotional support, autonomy, competence, relatedness and efficacy, and will serve to build a picture of choices students face in classrooms today. A second tier of understanding is intended to provide a theory framework utilizing self-determination theory as a primary lense of viewing student motivation. This will be used to connect the first tier of topics to student motivation, and help viewers conceptualize the elements that create motivated and engaged students.



In addition to providing teachers with tools needed to understand amotivation, there will be a third tier, which will serve to provide educators with resources for actual instruction. This last tier will serve to help teachers utilize their understandings and apply them using organizational strategies to shift towards providing autonomy supportive environments. The main goal of this section is to provide teachers with a final step towards action planning, while also acknowledging the process as a journey that should be pursued differently based on the school communities needs. Having a tiered system in place is meant to support teachers in their journey, and is not intended as a quick fix. Instead, it serves to explain a complex phenomenon that requires deep and purposeful thought.

### **Rationale**

The reason behind selecting the above mentioned learning theories and frameworks is to give educators and parents the best resource possible in understanding how to combat student amotivation. With past, current and developing research regarding the learning theories suggesting improvements in student motivation and the potential behind a website as a platform, this project will be able to condense a lot of material into an easy-to-read resource that will aim to inform support groups of students about the potential behind supporting autonomy in and out of the classroom, and helping to create lifelong learners who engage in school rather than withstand the brunts and blows it can carry out.

## **Audience and Setting**

The main audience for this project will be for educators of students between the ages of 5-18, but could be expanded to include post-secondary educators who experience many of the same problems younger age-group teachers see in their classrooms when it comes to student motivation. In an age where standardized tests are the norm for measuring achievement, students are faced with a growing list of academic goals that do not always translate to actual learning. Instead, students are told to read material that may or may not fulfil their interests with the expectations that they will be engaged and motivated to learn. As many educators in the United States and abroad understand, the problems students are facing stem from both direct and indirect causes. The intent behind focusing on this audience group as a general focus is to encourage all teachers to understand how classroom management strategies, curriculum development, and pedagogy can be transformed to encourage more meaningful engagement among all students and serve to gradually address causes of student amotivation. Additionally, focusing in on teachers as the main audience will encourage changes to be made at the source of education across the board.

## **Web Design**

The design of my website was intended to be broken down into several web pages that serve different, but complementary supportive purposes in understanding student motivation. While I thought it important to include multiple pages for various levels of understanding the SDT lense, I also thought it important that the pages were independent,

but easily accessible from any page. This is why the pages of “What Motivates Students”, “Self-Determination Theory”, “Guided Framework”, “Recommended Readings”, and “References” are located at the top menu.

## **Homepage**

According to HHS (2006), the homepage serves as a first impression for the site’s visitors. They add, website visitors only make it past the homepage about half the time (HHS, 2006). With this in mind I knew it was important for me to design a homepage that would make a positive impression on my audience. One way to accomplish this is by limiting the length of the page along with the amount of text. The HHS (2006) explains most users simply scan the homepage, and including too much text can slow them down or turn them off entirely. They also suggest limiting the overall length of the homepage to one screenful, as users rarely scroll past that (HHS, 2006). For the homepage, I decided on adhering to this advice by providing a quick mission-statement of what the purpose of the website was. On a frequent basis, educators are encountering many observed issues within their classrooms, all of which need expedient solutions. The last thing I wanted my website to do was to lead them down a path that they did not need to take and waste their valuable time in the process. In response to this possibility, I made my mission statement purposeful in explaining what the website will provide.

## **Providing Useful Content**

In addition to having a homepage that would serve as a positive first impression to visitors of the site, it was also important to me to provide useful content throughout the

entire site. The HHS (2006) explains a website's contents should be "engaging, relevant, and appropriate to the audience" (p. 2). With this in mind, I decided to place an emphasis on providing information purposefully and succinctly. I also decided to include content that educators need most--additional material to learn more, and resources to apply in their classrooms.

### **What Motivates Students?**

For this page, I wanted to provide a baseline knowledge set among readers on some important concepts to be able to differentiate. In my own research, I often confused interest from motivation. In this page, I created headings that aimed at answering the questions I had when I was conducting research regarding terminology and basic concepts.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

When thinking about what content would be included on the website, I realized that looking at motivation supports through research was easier said than done. However, I did find that looking at motivation through a lense in a theory was helpful in understanding what elements went into being a motivated individual. Therefore, I made this page with the purpose of looking at motivation through a lense of Self-Determination Theory, which breaks the complex amalgamation of information into three essential groupings: autonomy support, relatedness, and competence. The main thought behind this was to continue developing a knowledge base for readers, and give them more content before diving into the framework.

## **Guided Framework**

With a foundation of knowledge established in the first two pages of the website, an emphasis was placed on the “Guided Framework” page, which was to serve as the main resource for teachers in moving towards more motivation-supportive strategies in their classrooms. Within this page, a brief description of how educators can use the contents is included at the top and center. It explains that the framework is not a “fix-all”, but a way of thinking when developing lesson plans and learning environments. In addition to the description, a video was placed front and center at the top of the page as a summary to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) lense they should be looking through when viewing the page. The subsequent subheadings were seven steps of thought of the framework, each meeting one of the three psychological needs of SDT (autonomy, relatedness, competence). Under each subheading, is a combination of research-based findings, and summaries of research synthesized into suggestions for educators.

**Classroom resources.** Some educators accessing the site might want to have easier access to resources to be used in classes. This page is linked under the “Guided Framework” page, and therefore serves as a quick-link to all resources included in the website. A description of the resources is included under the headings giving additional context.

## **Suggested Readings**

In addition to providing teachers with resources they can apply in their classrooms quickly, there was also a need to display related materials that can help them learn more about how to support student motivation through autonomy supports. The “Suggested

Readings” page meets this goal by giving a series of book recommendations under the heading “Books” and websites under the heading “Websites” to learn more about motivation and strategies to use in supporting motivation.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter is to give a description of the project, its format, and the reasoning behind decisions that lead to its creation. In it, the project format was explained with emphasis on the tiered system of understanding the main learning theory of self-determination theory. The following chapter will serve as a final summary of project findings and provide impacts and recommendations as to what educators can do to resolve them based on research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

### Introduction

After conducting meetings within my PLC to discuss possible solutions for observed student apathy, it was clear that understandings of what motivates students needed to be further developed. As a professional, I felt the need for more in-depth understandings of what my fellow educators and I can do to support students in becoming more engaged and motivated to learn.

In order to be effective as a tool for meaningful change, I knew that my project had to take on a form that placed implementation and adaptability at the core, while also serving to support current research. This led me to develop a project which serves as a resource for educators to better understand and meet the challenges student motivation poses in the education field. Through my research and project creating a Google Sites website, my purpose attempted to address my research question: *How does providing students with autonomy-supportive instruction strategies and choice impact motivation to learn within the classroom?*

This chapter will serve as a reflection of the capstone project. In it, I will explain the new learnings I have come away with -- both about the project, and myself as an professional. I will then revisit past and current literature and explain its significance and connection to the capstone project. Then, I will reflect on the limitations and implications this project has in relation to the advancement of the education field. Lastly, I will explain future plans for the project moving forward.

### **New Learnings**

Over the course of this project, I have learned many things about my profession, and myself. I have learned that through researching something that I am passionate about, I am able to uncover more layers of what I value in education. Throughout the process of research and creation, I was constantly thinking about how students and teachers are faced with a growing list of tasks that require specific skills and sustained motivation to accomplish. Through my own struggles with motivation within education as a student, I was able to view my topic through lenses of both student and teacher, which led me to understand things in ways that I never knew possible. After the creation of my project, I have also realized how important it is to be aware of all of the elements that make us willing and able members of a larger learning community that serves to advance causes of a democratic society. With constant reflection on this learning process, we must be motivated ourselves to find common goals, and move conversations and research towards meeting those goals -- a monumental task, but a very necessary one at that.

Another aspect of this process that I can now reflect upon was the formation of the actual project. After devoting significant time researching the topic, I was able to convert research into my own understandings. In a sense, I was now part of the research community contributing to a much larger community than simply my own school. Instead of viewing myself as a teacher, I was thinking about the larger picture of the practice of education as a whole. This was a significant turning point in my self-awareness, as I viewed myself as having a wealth of knowledge I can use as part of my tool box to advance the field of education towards higher achievement.



## **Motivation as It Stands**

One of the main reasons I decided on focusing on student motivation -- or rather, student amotivation, was because my PLC held meetings to address a growing concern of student apathy in school. Up until that point, we had been having conversations about how struggling students do not lack in abilities, but rather in application of skills in completing class work. At the time of our meetings, the concept of student motivation seemed somewhat trivial. Teachers of course were putting forth their best efforts in making curriculum engaging for students, but we realized that not many teachers understood how deep the roots of motivation go in determining academic success. This is truly what motivated me to understand more, and apply new understandings to solve this problem.

## **Overview of Literature**

While this process allowed me to create something that contributes to the education field, it also required significant time and energy in learning about the current status of research that addressed my research question. As I dove into the research behind student motivation theory, I found that what some view as seemingly simple, was anything but simplistic. Throughout the research process, I found that there were several schools of thought, with the main theory being Self-Determination Theory -- a theory that was very interesting to use as a lense of understanding motivation. Learning about this was, for me, a motivating factor itself. Through motivating me, this theory also forced me to uncover more complex and complete understandings of what motivation is, and how it can be supported.

While I have generally viewed myself as a teacher who was able to engage my students in learning, I realized I probably had a complete lack of understanding of how motivation works. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the current literature that I found was that most of the current research is connected to studies rooted in Self-Determination Theory (SDT). In this theory, motivation is viewed as a force one uses to achieve goals instead of something one simply has or does not have. Previous models of what motivation was could be traced back to Skinner (1953) and the ideas of extrinsic rewards as motivators. What I found most interesting, is that while extrinsic rewards such as grades, praise, and awards do work for motivating some students, intrinsic motivation is what allows students to learn at a deeper, more meaningful level (Deci, 1971; Deci & Ryan, 1991, 1999, 2000; Bernstein, 1990; Gillet, Vallerand, & Lafrenière, 2012). Upon further research to better understand intrinsic motivation, I found that intrinsic motivation can be supported by providing individuals with three essential psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Deci, 1971; Deci & Ryan, 1991, 1999, 2000). This information made me realize how learning can connect with students on an individual level, which has great potential for helping struggling students demonstrate growth.

In addition to learning about the baseline theories that exist regarding student motivation, I thought it appropriate to look at specific ways teachers can help or hurt in bringing out motivation in their students. I had to ask myself questions like: *Does choice really matter?*, *What can teachers do to efficiently support student autonomy?*, and *Where does one draw the line with autonomy?* It was essential for me to understand these

supporting questions, because, as an educator, I am constantly participating in a balancing act between meeting standards and supporting students in digging deeper. In order to create an effective resource for other teachers, it was essential for me to understand these more specific teacher-oriented lines of inquiry.

In this more specific research, I found the work of Cheon & Reeve (2015) and Deci & Ryan (1991,1999, 2000) to be particularly useful. These experts in education psychology uncovered the deeper layers involved in what makes students unmotivated -- a stage that Cheon and Reeve (2015) call amotivation. In these core texts, the authors explore elements such as internal vs external locus of control, which refers to classroom structures where teachers are controlling and directing students (external locus of control), compared to classroom structures and behaviors as being supportive of autonomous behaviors (internal locus of control). Similar to intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, the research these experts conducted point to internal locus of control as being more advantageous for student motivation and learning.

Another significant finding I found helpful for understanding the deeper implications of student motivation was from Assor (2012), Reeve Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch (2004), and Reeve (2012). In their research, these experts discussed the importance of engagement and how it is connected with motivation. These experts on motivation went on to explain how teachers who provide choices to students is not enough to motivate students. They state that even if teachers provide students with choice, it is possible to have students who have a lesser-degree of motivation (Assor, 2012). They go on to explain the significance of perceived authenticity, and how that is a greater

determining factor in motivation than simply providing choice. Instead, they point to engagement as a way for educators to have insight into underlying motivations of students. This allows teachers to then provide choice through autonomy support, which encourages students to make important choices regarding the levels of autonomy, with an emphasis on cognitive autonomy (thinking for themselves) (Reeve et al, 2004; Reeve, 2012; Assor, 2012).

### **Implications**

After conducting extensive research on student motivation, I was able to gain an understanding of motivation that inspired me to take action in order to support students who fall into the category of amotivation. New lines of inquiry in research have led to understandings that simply are not implemented in schools, at least on a wide-scale basis. Seeing as my own school has recognized student amotivation as debilitating towards learning, I recognized this as an opportunity to create a resource for educators to quickly gain an understanding of specific elements of SDT, and implement autonomy supports within their classrooms. The main goal of this was to create a space for educators to start thinking about student motivation as a driving force for learning instead of something people inherently have. To move the conversation forward, I created a Google Site to give teachers tools they need to begin shifting thoughts towards more motivation-supportive strategies through SDT.

### **Benefit the Profession**

I created this project with the full intent of it advancing understandings of what role educators play in supporting student motivation. The goal was to provide teachers

with a framework of thought they can use to hopefully influence classroom cultures, lesson plan structure and content. By creating a website, I have placed an importance on broadcasting research to as many educators as possible to achieve as much widespread shifting in thought as possible. At the very least, the benefit of this project will be to initiate a process of continued discussions among educators towards supporting motivation through autonomy supports.

### **Limitations**

The main limitations this project could have, is that it might not give everything educators need to see a complete shift in motivation among their students. This website was created to serve as a framework of thought through a SDT lense, not an area where they can learn how to “fix” unmotivated students. In order for the website to have meaningful impact on student motivation, teachers must be the arbiters of knowledge and application. Another possible limitation of this website is that there are diverse needs between schools. Some schools might see this website as helpful in implementing school-wide change, but others might need additional support and more specific directives in order to move forward.

### **Looking Forward**

With all of the information gained from conducting research and creating a website, I have recognized a significant shift in my thinking towards supporting struggling students. Although I believe this process has been a great personal step forward, I strongly feel the need to expand and deepen the conversation at my school and abroad. In this regard, I fully intend to apply learned strategies within my own classroom

and continue to have professional meetings ensuring my colleagues and I are doing all we can to support motivation in our students. Secondly, I plan on expanding planning, implementation, and evaluation of motivation-supportive strategies. Often, educators get bogged down in the grind of evaluating standardized test scores. Continuing to meet and evaluate data on student motivation has been shown to have positive effects on learning, so it is incumbent on educators to continue developing strategies to engage students in deeper thought, encourage inquisitiveness, and learn to their highest abilities. If we want students to become productive members of society, we as educators must work on developing students who are not motivated to collectively solve problems while constantly reaching for the next -- not because they have to, but because they want to.

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