

THE INFLUENCE OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, is a psychological framework that emphasizes the importance of human motivation and the conditions that foster intrinsic motivation and engagement. In educational settings, the application of SDT offers valuable insights into how to enhance student engagement by addressing their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This article examines the influence of SDT on student engagement in the classroom, exploring how these core components can positively impact motivation, participation, and overall academic performance.

Autonomy, the first pillar of SDT, refers to the degree to which students feel they have control over their learning. When students are given the opportunity to make choices and feel ownership over their education, their intrinsic motivation increases, leading to deeper engagement and improved academic outcomes. Competence, the second component, involves students feeling capable and effective in their tasks. Teachers can support competence by providing constructive feedback and designing activities that challenge students at appropriate levels. When students perceive themselves as capable, they are more likely to stay engaged, take risks, and persist in difficult tasks. Relatedness, the third component of SDT, addresses the need for students to feel connected to others, including their peers and teachers. A sense of belonging in the classroom can significantly enhance engagement, as students who feel supported and valued are more likely to participate actively in discussions, collaborate with classmates, and invest in their academic work.

This article also discusses the challenges teachers face in implementing SDT principles in diverse classroom settings. While fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness can promote engagement, not all students respond uniformly to these motivational strategies. Individual differences, classroom culture, and external pressures such as standardized testing can complicate the application of SDT. However, research consistently shows that when students' psychological needs are met, they are more likely to exhibit self-motivation, curiosity, and a long-term commitment to learning.

SDT provides a robust framework for understanding student engagement and offers practical strategies for educators to create motivating and supportive classroom environments. By focusing on the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, teachers can enhance student engagement, promote a deeper understanding of subject matter, and foster a positive attitude toward learning. The article emphasizes that applying SDT requires intentional effort but can lead to lasting improvements in student outcomes. Further research and practical applications of SDT principles in various educational contexts are encouraged to better understand its impact on diverse student populations and settings.

Keywords: Influence, self-determination theory, engagement, classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in understanding the psychological factors that influence student engagement in educational settings. One of the most influential theories in this area is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. SDT focuses on the internal and external motivations that drive human behavior, particularly the conditions that foster intrinsic motivation, which is critical for active, sustained engagement in learning. Unlike traditional behavioral models that emphasize external rewards and punishments, SDT offers a more nuanced approach to motivation, highlighting the importance of satisfying fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are met, individuals are more likely to be self-motivated, engaged, and fulfilled in their activities, including academic work.

The relevance of SDT to education is profound, as student engagement is a key predictor of academic success and long-term learning outcomes. Engaged students tend to be more focused, curious, and willing to persist in the face of challenges. Conversely, disengaged students are often passive, unmotivated, and less likely to invest effort in their academic tasks. The challenge for educators, therefore, is to create learning environments that not only foster intellectual development but also meet students' psychological needs in ways that promote deeper, more meaningful engagement.

Self-Determination Theory and Its Core Components

At the heart of SDT are three core components: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the degree to which individuals feel they have control over their actions and decisions. In the classroom, this translates into students having a sense of ownership over their learning. When students are given choices, encouraged to pursue their interests, and allowed to engage in self-directed learning, they are more likely to feel autonomous. This autonomy, in turn, enhances intrinsic motivation, as students become more invested in their academic work not because they are required to, but because they want to.

The second component, competence, refers to the need to feel capable and effective in one's actions. In educational contexts, this involves students feeling that they can successfully complete tasks and overcome challenges. Teachers play a crucial role in supporting students' sense of competence by providing clear instructions, offering constructive

feedback, and designing tasks that are appropriately challenging. When students feel competent, they are more likely to engage with the material, take risks in their learning, and persist in the face of difficulties.

Relatedness, the third component of SDT, refers to the need to feel connected to others. In the classroom, this need is met when students feel a sense of belonging, both with their peers and with their teachers. A supportive classroom environment, where students feel valued and respected, can significantly enhance engagement. When students feel emotionally connected to their learning community, they are more likely to participate actively, collaborate with others, and develop a deeper commitment to their academic work.

The Importance of Student Engagement

Student engagement is critical not only for immediate academic performance but also for long-term educational outcomes. Research consistently shows that students who are more engaged in their learning are more likely to succeed academically, develop higher-order thinking skills, and maintain a positive attitude toward education. Engagement also promotes resilience, as engaged students are better equipped to handle setbacks and challenges in their academic journey. Moreover, engaged students are more likely to retain knowledge and apply what they have learned in real-world contexts, making engagement a key factor in lifelong learning.

However, promoting student engagement is not without its challenges. While SDT provides a strong theoretical framework for understanding how to enhance engagement, its application in diverse classroom settings can be complex. For example, different students may respond differently to opportunities for autonomy, with some thriving under self-directed learning while others may feel overwhelmed by too much freedom. Similarly, students with different levels of prior knowledge and skill may require varying levels of support to feel competent in their tasks. The need for relatedness can also vary, with some students feeling more socially connected than others, depending on their personalities and prior experiences.

1. THE CORE COMPONENTS OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, posits that human motivation is driven by the fulfillment

of three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are essential for fostering intrinsic motivation, which leads to sustained engagement and well-being. In the context of education, SDT provides a framework for understanding how to cultivate environments that enhance student engagement. By satisfying these core needs, educators can create conditions that promote a deeper and more meaningful connection to learning. This section explores each of these components in detail and examines their relevance to classroom settings.

1.1. Autonomy: The Power of Choice and Ownership

Autonomy refers to the need to feel in control of one's own actions and decisions. In educational settings, this translates to students having a sense of ownership over their learning processes. Autonomy is not merely about allowing students to make decisions; it is about creating an environment where they feel their choices are valued and respected. Research has shown that when students are given opportunities to make meaningful choices in their learning—such as selecting topics for projects or choosing methods of assessment—they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy-supportive teaching practices, such as providing rationale for tasks, acknowledging students' perspectives, and minimizing control, are essential for fostering this sense of agency.

A critical aspect of autonomy is the balance between structure and freedom. While students thrive on the ability to make choices, complete freedom can sometimes lead to confusion or overwhelm. Therefore, providing clear guidance and structure, while allowing flexibility within that framework, is crucial for supporting autonomy. For example, a teacher might provide a clear set of learning objectives but allow students to choose how they will demonstrate their understanding of the material. This combination of structure and freedom helps students feel both supported and autonomous, which enhances their motivation and engagement in the learning process (Reeve, 2006).

1.2. Competence: Building Skills and Confidence

The second core component of SDT, competence, refers to the need to feel effective and capable in one's actions. In the classroom, competence is nurtured when students are challenged appropriately and given opportunities to experience success. When students feel that they are mastering new skills or concepts, they are more likely to engage in tasks with persistence and enthusiasm. Conversely, when tasks are too easy or

too difficult, students may experience boredom or frustration, leading to disengagement.

Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering competence by designing tasks that are challenging yet attainable and by providing constructive feedback that helps students understand how to improve. According to SDT, feedback should be specific, timely, and focused on effort rather than innate ability. When students perceive that their competence is linked to their efforts, they are more likely to develop a growth mindset and persist in the face of challenges (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Furthermore, teachers can enhance students' sense of competence by setting clear expectations, offering resources for improvement, and celebrating incremental progress rather than focusing solely on final outcomes.

Competence is also closely tied to the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific tasks. Bandura's self-efficacy theory supports the idea that students are more likely to engage in tasks where they feel competent and avoid those where they feel inadequate (Bandura, 1997). Thus, supporting students in building both competence and confidence is essential for fostering sustained engagement in the classroom.

1.3. Relatedness: Fostering Connection and Belonging

The third core component of SDT, relatedness, refers to the need to feel connected to others and to belong to a community. In the classroom, relatedness is about creating an environment where students feel supported, respected, and valued by both their peers and their teachers. When students experience a sense of belonging, they are more likely to engage in learning, collaborate with others, and participate actively in classroom discussions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Teachers can foster relatedness by creating a positive classroom culture that encourages cooperation, empathy, and mutual respect. For example, group work and collaborative projects can help students build social connections while working toward common goals. Additionally, when teachers demonstrate care for their students' well-being and academic progress, students are more likely to feel secure and motivated to engage in learning (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Relatedness also extends beyond the classroom, as students' sense of connection to the broader school community can significantly impact their engagement. Activities that promote school-wide involvement, such as

clubs, sports, and extracurricular events, can enhance students' sense of belonging and, in turn, their commitment to academic success.

1.4. The Interaction of Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

While autonomy, competence, and relatedness are distinct needs, they are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For example, when students feel competent in their work, they are more likely to seek out opportunities for autonomy. Similarly, a strong sense of relatedness can encourage students to take risks in their learning (Nuredin A, & Nuredin M., 2023), as they feel supported by their peers and teachers. The satisfaction of all three needs is crucial for promoting intrinsic motivation and engagement in learning. When one or more of these needs is unmet, students are more likely to disengage, exhibit lower motivation, and experience frustration in the learning process (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In conclusion, the core components of SDT—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how to enhance student engagement in the classroom. By creating an environment that meets these psychological needs, educators can foster a deeper, more meaningful connection to learning that promotes long-term academic success.

2. AUTONOMY AND ITS ROLE IN ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Autonomy, one of the core components of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), plays a crucial role in fostering student engagement in the classroom. Autonomy refers to the feeling of control over one's own actions and decisions, the sense that one's behavior is self-directed rather than imposed by external forces. In the educational context, autonomy involves giving students meaningful choices in their learning processes, enabling them to take ownership of their academic work. This section explores the concept of autonomy, its impact on student motivation and engagement, and how educators can effectively promote autonomy in the classroom to enhance learning outcomes.

2.1. The Importance of Autonomy in Learning

Deci and Ryan (2000), the architects of SDT, argue that autonomy is a fundamental psychological need that drives intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for external rewards or pressures. When students feel that their learning is self-determined, they are more likely to be intrinsically

motivated, which leads to greater engagement and persistence in academic tasks. Research has consistently shown that when students perceive they have autonomy in their learning, they are more likely to invest effort, seek out challenges, and persist in the face of difficulties (Reeve, 2006).

Autonomy in the classroom does not mean giving students complete freedom to do whatever they want. Rather, it involves creating opportunities for students to make meaningful choices that align with their interests and learning goals. This could include allowing students to choose topics for research projects, decide how they will demonstrate their understanding of a concept, or set their own learning objectives. When students feel that they have a voice in their education, they are more likely to take responsibility for their learning and approach their studies with greater enthusiasm (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

2.2. The Impact of Autonomy on Student Engagement

The relationship between autonomy and student engagement is well-documented. Studies have shown that autonomy-supportive environments, where students are encouraged to take initiative and make decisions, lead to higher levels of engagement, both behavioral and emotional (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002). Behavioral engagement refers to students' participation in academic activities, such as attending classes, completing assignments, and participating in discussions. Emotional engagement, on the other hand, involves students' feelings of interest, enjoyment, and connection to the material they are learning.

When students have autonomy, they are more likely to engage behaviorally by taking ownership of their tasks and staying focused on their work. Autonomy also enhances emotional engagement, as students who feel in control of their learning are more likely to experience positive emotions such as curiosity and enjoyment. This emotional connection to learning fosters a deeper level of engagement, where students are not only completing tasks but also actively seeking to understand and internalize the material (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

Furthermore, autonomy has been linked to cognitive engagement, which involves the mental effort students put into learning. When students feel autonomous, they are more likely to engage in deep learning strategies, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflection. They are also more likely to take academic risks, as autonomy reduces the fear of failure and encourages exploration and creativity (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). In contrast, controlling environments, where students feel pressured or

coerced, tend to stifle creativity and lead to surface-level learning strategies aimed solely at meeting external expectations.

2.3. Strategies for Promoting Autonomy in the Classroom

Promoting autonomy in the classroom requires intentional strategies from educators. One effective way to support autonomy is by providing students with meaningful choices. This could involve offering options for how students will complete assignments, allowing them to select topics for projects, or letting them decide how they will demonstrate their mastery of a subject. These choices give students a sense of control and ownership over their learning, which fosters intrinsic motivation (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

Another key strategy is to encourage student voice and input in the classroom. Teachers can create an autonomy-supportive environment by involving students in decision-making processes, such as setting class rules or determining the structure of a lesson. When students feel that their opinions and preferences are valued, they are more likely to feel a sense of autonomy and responsibility for their learning. This can lead to higher levels of engagement and motivation (Reeve, 2006).

Providing rationale for tasks is also an important aspect of promoting autonomy. When teachers explain the purpose behind a task or learning activity, students are more likely to understand its relevance and feel motivated to engage with it. This is particularly important for tasks that may not seem immediately interesting or enjoyable. By offering a rationale, teachers can help students connect the task to their broader learning goals, making it easier for them to internalize the activity and approach it with a sense of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Finally, creating a supportive and non-controlling classroom environment is crucial for fostering autonomy. Teachers should avoid using controlling language, such as “you must” or “you have to,” and instead encourage students by using autonomy-supportive language, such as “you can” or “I encourage you to.” Providing positive feedback that focuses on effort rather than outcomes is another way to support autonomy, as it helps students feel competent and in control of their learning progress (Jang, Reeve, & Halusic, 2016).

Autonomy is a central component of Self-Determination Theory and plays a critical role in enhancing student engagement in the classroom. By giving students meaningful choices, encouraging their input, providing rationale for tasks, and fostering a supportive learning environment,

teachers can help students feel more autonomous and intrinsically motivated. This autonomy leads to higher levels of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, which ultimately promotes deeper learning and academic success. As educators continue to explore ways to enhance student engagement, promoting autonomy will remain a key strategy for creating motivating and empowering learning environments.

3. COMPETENCE: BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION IN LEARNING

Competence, a key element of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), refers to the need to feel effective and capable in completing tasks and achieving goals. In the context of education, competence plays a crucial role in fostering student engagement by building confidence and motivation. When students believe they have the skills necessary to succeed, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, take on challenges, and persist in their academic endeavors. This section explores the role of competence in enhancing student engagement, discussing how teachers can support students' sense of competence through effective feedback, appropriately challenging tasks, and fostering a growth mindset.

3.1. The Role of Competence in Student Engagement

Competence is central to SDT because it directly influences students' motivation and willingness to engage in learning activities. When students feel competent, they are more likely to be motivated by intrinsic factors, such as curiosity and the desire for mastery, rather than external rewards like grades or praise (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivation is particularly important in education, as it leads to deeper engagement with the material, greater perseverance in the face of difficulties, and a long-term commitment to learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, when students feel incompetent or incapable, they are more likely to disengage from their studies, avoid challenging tasks, and experience negative emotions such as frustration or anxiety (Dweck, 2006).

One of the ways in which competence influences engagement is through its impact on students' self-efficacy, a concept closely related to SDT. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific tasks or situations (Bandura, 1997). Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to approach learning with confidence, set challenging goals, and persist when faced with obstacles. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy may doubt their abilities, avoid difficult tasks, and give up more easily when they encounter setbacks. Teachers can play a pivotal role in fostering students' sense of competence by

creating learning environments that support self-efficacy through clear expectations, constructive feedback, and opportunities for success.

3.2. Providing Effective Feedback to Support Competence

One of the most important strategies for promoting competence in the classroom is providing effective feedback. Feedback that is specific, timely, and focused on effort rather than inherent ability can significantly enhance students' perceptions of their competence (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). When feedback emphasizes the process of learning—such as strategies used, effort expended, and improvements made—students are more likely to develop a growth mindset, which is the belief that abilities can be developed through hard work and dedication (Dweck, 2006). This mindset encourages students to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than threats to their self-worth, leading to greater engagement and resilience.

Teachers can also enhance competence by offering feedback that highlights incremental progress. For example, rather than simply indicating whether an answer is right or wrong, teachers can provide feedback that explains why an answer is incorrect and offers guidance on how to improve. This type of feedback not only helps students understand their mistakes but also empowers them to take corrective action and develop their skills (Brookhart, 2008). When students feel that they can improve through effort and reflection, their sense of competence increases, which in turn motivates them to engage more deeply with their learning.

3.3. Challenging Tasks and Opportunities for Mastery

Another key element of fostering competence is providing students with appropriately challenging tasks. Tasks that are too easy can lead to boredom and disengagement, while tasks that are too difficult can lead to frustration and a sense of incompetence. According to SDT, optimal engagement occurs when students are given tasks that are challenging enough to stretch their abilities but not so difficult that they feel overwhelming (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This balance between challenge and skill is often referred to as the "zone of proximal development," where students can succeed with effort and guidance (Vygotsky, 1978).

Teachers can support competence by designing tasks that encourage active problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity. For example, rather than assigning repetitive, low-level tasks, teachers can create assignments that require students to apply concepts in novel ways or to

work collaboratively to solve complex problems. These types of tasks not only build competence by helping students develop new skills but also foster intrinsic motivation by engaging students in meaningful, real-world applications of their learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

In addition to offering challenging tasks, it is important for teachers to provide opportunities for mastery. Mastery experiences, in which students successfully complete tasks and see tangible improvements in their abilities, are one of the most powerful sources of competence. When students experience mastery, they develop a stronger belief in their abilities, which enhances their motivation to take on new challenges (Bandura, 1997). Teachers can create opportunities for mastery by scaffolding learning experiences, providing support and guidance as students work through increasingly complex tasks. As students gain confidence in their abilities, they are more likely to engage fully in their learning and to take ownership of their academic success.

3.4. Fostering a Growth Mindset

A growth mindset, the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort and learning, is closely linked to the concept of competence. Research by Carol Dweck (2006) has shown that students who believe their abilities can grow are more likely to embrace challenges, persist in the face of difficulty, and recover from failure. In contrast, students with a fixed mindset—who believe that their abilities are innate and unchangeable—are more likely to avoid challenges, give up easily, and feel threatened by failure.

Teachers can foster a growth mindset in their students by emphasizing effort and improvement over innate ability. This can be done through the language used in feedback, the design of tasks, and the overall classroom culture. When students see that effort leads to improvement, they are more likely to feel competent and motivated to engage in their learning. For example, a teacher might praise a student for their perseverance in solving a difficult math problem, rather than simply praising the correct answer. This type of feedback reinforces the idea that competence is developed through hard work and persistence, which can inspire students to continue striving for mastery (Dweck, 2006).

Competence is a vital component of Self-Determination Theory and plays a critical role in fostering student engagement. When students feel competent, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, take on

challenges, and persist in their academic endeavors. Teachers can support students' sense of competence by providing effective feedback, offering appropriately challenging tasks, and fostering a growth mindset. By creating a classroom environment that promotes competence, teachers can help students develop the confidence and motivation they need to succeed in their learning.

4. RELATEDNESS: FOSTERING CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Relatedness, one of the three fundamental components of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), is the psychological need to feel connected to others and to belong to a community. In educational settings, fostering a sense of relatedness is crucial for student engagement, as students who feel emotionally and socially connected to their peers and teachers are more likely to participate actively, collaborate with others, and maintain a sustained interest in their learning. This section explores the role of relatedness in enhancing student engagement, discussing how teachers can cultivate positive relationships in the classroom and create a supportive learning environment that fosters social engagement.

4.1. The Importance of Relatedness in Learning

Deci and Ryan (2000) emphasize that relatedness is a core psychological need, essential for fostering intrinsic motivation and emotional well-being. In educational contexts, students' sense of relatedness refers to their feelings of connection and belonging within the classroom environment. This need is satisfied when students feel cared for and supported by both their peers and teachers. Research has shown that students who experience a high degree of relatedness are more likely to be engaged in their learning, exhibit prosocial behavior, and develop a positive attitude toward school (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Conversely, students who feel isolated or disconnected are more likely to disengage from academic tasks, exhibit behavioral problems, and experience emotional distress.

Relatedness plays a critical role in fostering emotional engagement, which involves students' feelings of interest, enjoyment, and enthusiasm for learning. When students feel a sense of connection to their classmates and teachers, they are more likely to experience positive emotions in the classroom, which in turn enhances their overall engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Furthermore, relatedness supports behavioral engagement, as students who feel socially connected are more likely to

participate in class discussions, collaborate on group projects, and take an active role in their learning community.

4.2. Building Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

One of the most effective ways to foster relatedness in the classroom is by building positive, supportive relationships between students and teachers. When students feel that their teachers care about them as individuals and are invested in their success, they are more likely to engage in their learning and persist in the face of challenges (Reeve, 2006). Teachers can cultivate these relationships by showing empathy, providing encouragement, and demonstrating genuine interest in their students' well-being.

Research indicates that the quality of student-teacher relationships has a significant impact on student engagement and academic performance. For example, a study by Pianta, Hamre, and Allen (2012) found that students who reported strong, positive relationships with their teachers were more likely to be motivated, engaged, and successful in school. Teachers who foster positive relationships with their students create a safe and supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves, taking risks, and seeking help when needed.

One key strategy for building positive student-teacher relationships is to establish open lines of communication. Teachers who actively listen to their students, acknowledge their perspectives, and respond to their concerns create a sense of trust and respect that enhances relatedness. Additionally, teachers can support students' sense of relatedness by providing individualized attention, offering feedback that is both constructive and supportive, and recognizing students' unique strengths and contributions to the classroom community (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

4.3. Promoting Peer Connections and Collaboration

Relatedness is not only about the student-teacher relationship; it also involves the connections students form with their peers. Collaborative learning opportunities, such as group projects, peer discussions, and cooperative problem-solving activities, can help students build social bonds and develop a sense of belonging in the classroom. When students work together toward a common goal, they are more likely to experience feelings of relatedness, which enhances their motivation and engagement (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Teachers can promote peer connections by creating a classroom culture that values teamwork, cooperation, and mutual support. One way to do

this is by designing activities that require students to collaborate and rely on each other's strengths. For example, in a group project, each student can be assigned a specific role or responsibility, encouraging them to contribute to the success of the group while building trust and interdependence. Additionally, peer feedback sessions, where students review each other's work and provide constructive comments, can foster a sense of community and help students feel supported by their classmates (Kagan, 1994).

It is also important for teachers to actively manage classroom dynamics to ensure that all students feel included and valued. This includes addressing issues of exclusion, bullying, or social isolation and creating opportunities for students to interact with peers they may not typically engage with. By promoting an inclusive classroom environment where every student feels that they belong, teachers can enhance relatedness and encourage greater social and emotional engagement.

4.4. Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment

The overall classroom environment plays a crucial role in fostering relatedness. A supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere, where students feel safe, respected, and valued, is essential for promoting social engagement and emotional well-being. Teachers can create this environment by establishing clear expectations for respectful behavior, encouraging empathy and understanding, and modeling positive social interactions.

One way to foster a supportive classroom environment is by implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) programs that teach students skills such as empathy, communication, and conflict resolution. SEL programs help students develop the social and emotional competencies needed to build positive relationships with their peers and teachers, which in turn enhances their sense of relatedness and engagement (Elias et al., 1997). Additionally, classroom activities that promote social-emotional development, such as cooperative games, role-playing exercises, and reflective discussions, can help students develop stronger connections with their classmates and improve their ability to navigate social situations.

Teachers can also create a sense of relatedness by recognizing and celebrating the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their students. When students feel that their cultural identities are acknowledged and respected in the classroom, they are more likely to feel connected to their

learning community. Culturally responsive teaching practices, such as incorporating diverse perspectives into the curriculum and using inclusive language, can help create a classroom environment where all students feel that they belong (Gay, 2002).

Relatedness is a fundamental component of Self-Determination Theory and plays a critical role in fostering student engagement. When students feel connected to their peers and teachers, they are more likely to participate actively in their learning, experience positive emotions, and develop a long-term commitment to education. Teachers can support relatedness by building positive relationships with their students, promoting peer collaboration, and creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment. By fostering strong social connections, teachers can enhance student engagement and create a learning environment that promotes both academic success and emotional well-being.

5. CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN APPLYING SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY IN CLASSROOMS

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a powerful framework for understanding how to enhance student engagement by focusing on the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. However, while SDT provides a clear theoretical foundation, applying its principles in classroom settings presents certain challenges. Educators must navigate diverse student needs, varying educational contexts, and external pressures such as standardized testing and curriculum constraints. This section explores the challenges teachers face when implementing SDT in classrooms and offers strategies for overcoming these challenges to create environments that promote intrinsic motivation and engagement.

5.1. Challenge 1: Balancing Autonomy with Classroom Structure

One of the key principles of SDT is fostering autonomy, which involves giving students a sense of control over their learning. However, providing autonomy in the classroom can be difficult, especially when teachers must adhere to a prescribed curriculum or prepare students for standardized assessments. Teachers may feel pressure to maintain tight control over classroom activities to ensure that students meet specific learning objectives, potentially stifling opportunities for autonomy (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002).

Strategy: To address this challenge, teachers can create a structured environment that still allows for autonomy within defined boundaries. For

example, rather than giving students complete freedom over their learning, teachers can provide choice within a structured framework. This might involve allowing students to choose from a range of project topics, select how they will demonstrate their learning (e.g., presentation, essay, or creative project), or decide which questions to answer on an assignment. By giving students meaningful choices that align with curriculum goals, teachers can foster autonomy while maintaining the necessary structure to guide learning (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

5.2. Challenge 2: Supporting Diverse Learners

Another challenge in applying SDT is addressing the diverse needs of students in the classroom. Students vary in their levels of intrinsic motivation, competence, and relatedness, meaning that some students may respond differently to autonomy-supportive practices. For example, students who lack confidence in their abilities may struggle with self-directed learning, while students from different cultural backgrounds may have varying expectations about the teacher's role in guiding their education (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010).

Strategy: Differentiated instruction is a key strategy for supporting diverse learners while applying SDT principles. Teachers can tailor their approaches to meet the varying levels of competence and autonomy in their classrooms. For example, some students may need more guidance and feedback to build their sense of competence, while others may benefit from greater independence. Teachers can also foster relatedness by creating a classroom culture that values diversity and encourages collaboration among students from different backgrounds. Group work, peer mentoring, and cooperative learning activities can help students build social connections and feel a sense of belonging, which supports their intrinsic motivation (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

5.3. Challenge 3: External Pressures and Standardized Testing

A significant barrier to implementing SDT in classrooms is the external pressure to meet standardized testing requirements and curriculum benchmarks. These pressures can create a more controlling environment, where teachers feel compelled to focus on performance outcomes rather than fostering intrinsic motivation. In such environments, students may become more extrinsically motivated, focusing on grades and test scores rather than the learning process itself (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Strategy: One way to address this challenge is to integrate SDT principles into the structure of test preparation and curriculum delivery. Teachers

can emphasize mastery and understanding rather than performance by encouraging students to focus on the process of learning, rather than simply achieving high test scores. For example, formative assessments that provide constructive feedback can help students understand their progress and areas for improvement, fostering a growth mindset. Additionally, teachers can explain the rationale behind tasks and assessments, helping students see the value in learning for its own sake rather than as a means to an end (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

5.4. Challenge 4: Maintaining Competence Through Appropriately Challenging Tasks

One of the core components of SDT is competence, which involves students feeling capable and effective in their learning. However, finding the right balance of challenge is crucial—tasks that are too easy can lead to boredom, while tasks that are too difficult can result in frustration and disengagement. The challenge for educators is to design activities that are appropriately challenging for a diverse group of learners, ensuring that all students experience a sense of competence and progress (Bandura, 1997).

Strategy: Teachers can use scaffolding techniques to provide the appropriate level of support as students work through challenging tasks. Scaffolding involves breaking down complex tasks into smaller, manageable steps, offering guidance and feedback as students gradually build their skills and confidence. Teachers can also use differentiated tasks that vary in complexity to meet the needs of different learners. Providing clear, constructive feedback is critical for helping students recognize their progress and develop a sense of competence, which encourages further engagement (Brookhart, 2008).

5.5. Challenge 5: Fostering Relatedness in Large or Diverse Classrooms

Relatedness, the need for social connection and a sense of belonging, is another critical component of SDT. In large or diverse classrooms, fostering a sense of relatedness can be challenging, as students may feel isolated or disconnected from their peers or teachers. Large class sizes can make it difficult for teachers to build strong, individual relationships with students, and some students may struggle to form social connections in a diverse environment where they feel different from their peers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Strategy: To foster relatedness, teachers can create opportunities for social interaction and collaboration through group work, peer discussions, and

cooperative learning activities. Building a classroom community that values empathy, respect, and inclusivity can help students feel more connected to their peers and teachers. Teachers can also use regular check-ins and one-on-one interactions to build relationships with students, showing that they care about each student's well-being and academic progress. Recognizing and celebrating diversity in the classroom, and ensuring that all students feel respected and included, can further enhance relatedness (Reeve, 2006).

While applying Self-Determination Theory in the classroom presents several challenges, there are effective strategies that educators can use to foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby enhancing student engagement. By providing structured choices, differentiating instruction, emphasizing mastery over performance, scaffolding tasks, and fostering a supportive classroom environment, teachers can create learning conditions that meet students' psychological needs and promote intrinsic motivation. As education continues to evolve, understanding how to effectively apply SDT principles will be crucial for cultivating engaged, motivated, and successful learners.

CONCLUSION

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a robust and insightful framework for understanding how to foster student engagement in the classroom. Grounded in the fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, SDT emphasizes the importance of nurturing intrinsic motivation, which drives students to engage deeply with their learning. In the context of education, SDT offers educators the tools to create learning environments that support students' internal motivation, encourage active participation, and enhance their overall academic experience.

Throughout this article, the influence of SDT on student engagement has been explored from multiple angles. Autonomy, or the sense of control over one's learning, is a key component that encourages students to take ownership of their education. By giving students opportunities to make meaningful choices, teachers can increase intrinsic motivation, helping students engage with academic tasks because they want to, rather than because they have to. Offering students a degree of autonomy fosters curiosity, creativity, and a sense of responsibility, all of which are crucial for sustained academic engagement.

Competence, the second pillar of SDT, is equally vital. When students feel competent and capable in their learning, they are more likely to engage with the material, take on challenges, and persist in the face of difficulties. Teachers can support competence by providing appropriately challenging tasks, offering constructive feedback, and recognizing students' progress. A focus on building competence not only enhances students' engagement but also develops their confidence, helping them take academic risks and embrace learning as a continuous process of growth.

Relatedness, the third component, refers to students' need to feel connected to their peers, teachers, and the broader learning environment. A classroom where students feel supported, respected, and valued encourages both emotional and social engagement. Positive relationships with teachers and peers foster a sense of belonging, which in turn motivates students to participate actively, collaborate with others, and invest in their learning. Building a strong sense of relatedness is essential for creating a classroom community where students feel safe to explore new ideas, ask questions, and engage with the material.

However, the application of SDT in the classroom is not without its challenges. Educators face various constraints, including curriculum demands, standardized testing pressures, and the diverse needs of students. Balancing these external pressures with the need to foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness requires intentionality and flexibility. Strategies such as providing structured choices, differentiating instruction, scaffolding tasks, and promoting peer collaboration can help educators overcome these challenges and create an environment conducive to student engagement.

Moreover, SDT's emphasis on intrinsic motivation highlights the limitations of extrinsic rewards, such as grades and external incentives, in promoting long-term engagement. While extrinsic motivators may be effective in the short term, they often fail to cultivate the deeper, more meaningful connection to learning that intrinsic motivation fosters. SDT encourages educators to shift the focus from performance outcomes to the learning process, helping students find value in their education beyond the rewards and pressures of external assessments.

Incorporating SDT principles into classroom practice requires a shift in mindset for both educators and students. Teachers must move away from controlling and directive teaching methods toward a more supportive and facilitative approach. This involves creating opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning, providing meaningful feedback that

fosters growth, and building a positive, inclusive classroom community. For students, the application of SDT encourages a shift from focusing on grades and outcomes to embracing learning as a dynamic and self-directed process.

In conclusion, Self-Determination Theory offers valuable insights into how educators can enhance student engagement by meeting students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By applying SDT principles in the classroom, teachers can foster intrinsic motivation, helping students become more engaged, motivated, and resilient learners. As education systems continue to evolve in response to new challenges and opportunities, the importance of creating motivating, student-centered learning environments will remain paramount. Future research and practice should continue to explore how SDT can be effectively integrated into diverse educational settings, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and personally.

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