Self-Determination Theory (SDT) & Strengths-Based Approaches from a Positive Psychology (PP) Perspective

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Human Development, Learning, & Culture
Opening Activity

1. Think of an individual student whom you either currently are working with or have worked with in the past. Finish the sentence:
   a) I know [name] is **smart** because...
Opening Activity

1. Think of an individual student whom you either currently are working with or have worked with in the past. Finish the sentence:
   a) I know [name] is **smart** because...
   b) If [name] is so smart, **why can’t he/she**...
Outline

• Summary of **SDT**
  – Approaches, benefits, & how it applies to at-risk youth
    • A discussion of our research
• Summary of **PP strengths-based approaches**
  – Practices & benefits; & how they apply to at-risk youth
    • A description of my dissertation research

• **SDT grounds our work:** *Promoting Positive Life Outcomes*... & the two literatures ground my dissertation work.
Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Description

• **Social-cognitive** theory of motivation

• Motivation: “the hypothetical construct used to describe the internal and/or external forces that produce the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of behaviour” (Vallerand & Thrill, 1993, p. 18)

• Evolved from study of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation...
SDT’s Continuum of Motivation

• Process of **internalization**:  
  - Externally Regulated → Internally Regulated

• SDT’s **Continuum of Motivation**:
  - External → Introjected → Identified → Integrated

(Gagne et al., 2010)
SDT’s Basic Psychological Needs

- People have inherent growth tendencies to exert effort, agency, & commitment in their lives.
- These help people to meet their three basic psychological needs of:

  * positive outcomes associated with need satisfaction
Applied to Education ... 

• Three categories of teacher behaviours that support student SD:
  1. Autonomy-support
  2. Structure
  3. Involvement

  (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993)
Autonomy-Support

1. **Autonomy-Support**: Allowing internal states to direct behaviour. Recognizing & fostering student needs, interests, & preferences. Four categories of *autonomy-supportive* teacher behaviours (Reeve, 2006):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nurturing inner motivational resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Relying on informational &amp; un-controlling language</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Communicating value &amp; providing rationales</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Acknowledging &amp; accepting student expressions of negative affect</td>
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## Autonomy-Supportive Behaviours

- Nine **specific behaviours** that are **autonomy-supports**:

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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Listening carefully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Allowing students to work in their own way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Allowing students to talk</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Carefully arranging learning materials &amp; seating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Encouraging effort &amp; persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Praising improvement &amp; skill</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Offering progress-enabling hints</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Acknowledging student questions &amp; comments</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Clearly acknowledging student perspectives</td>
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</table>
2. **Structure**: Giving students a sufficient amount & quality of information.

- Some behaviours are **autonomy-supportive** & provide **structure**:
  - telling students what is expected of them, while also being flexible;
  - offering progress-enabling hints;
  - praising signs of improvement; giving students opportunity to talk;
  - acknowledging student perspectives & experiences.

- Another teacher behaviour, shown to increase student **self-efficacy**: Giving students the opportunity to practice and be successful at a task (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).
3. **Involvement**: Taking time for; expressing warmth toward; being attuned to; & providing resources for students.

- It is argued that **all three needs** can only be met in the context of close/caring community.
- Program designed to enhance pro-social development in students (Battistich et al., 1997):
  - Collaborating with others
  - Providing & receiving meaningful help
  - Discussing & reflecting upon others’ experiences
  - Developing important social competencies
Promoting Positive Life Outcomes for Children and Youth who Struggle in School*

Overview

• How are the academic, social, & emotional needs of at-risk youth met within various educational programs?

• Case study analysis.

• Developed and refined in one alternative education program.
One Context

• An **alternative school** in a large urban school district.
• Students are youth (15 to 19 years) who are on **probation** or in the care of a **social worker**.
• Have a history of academic difficulties, which makes them **vulnerable to number negative outcomes** including school disengagement & drop-out.
• Many misuse drugs and alcohol, have few positive role models, & many barriers to employment.
# Two Parts of Case Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) Observations</th>
<th>Looked at whether and how students were given the opportunity to experience autonomy, belonging, &amp; competence in activities in their alternative education program.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(2) Photo-Elicitation (PE) Technique</td>
<td>Asked students to take photos that represented their experiences of autonomy, belonging, &amp; competence during classroom activities, &amp; later, to discuss these photos with us.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observations: What We’ve Discovered ...

1. Teacher engaged in practices in line with what the SDT literature outlines.

2. These practices were embedded in activities designed for the specific students.
   – Activities were not primarily academic (e.g., Cross Fit, Garden Works, Cooking)

3. A new category emerged: Rapport
Example Activity: *CrossFit*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Specific Behaviours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Influence</strong></td>
<td>1. Students are given the opportunity to talk.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Student perceptions are acknowledged.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Students have a part in the decision-making process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>1. The teacher is clear about his or her expectations of the class.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. The teacher’s expectations are flexible, depending on student ability.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. A rationale is provided for the activity.</td>
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## Example Activity: *CrossFit*

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<tr>
<td><strong>Group Cohesion</strong></td>
<td>1. The teacher fosters active participation in the group.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. The students are encouraged to share purpose/goals.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Cooperation (e.g., helping each other) is encouraged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement</strong></td>
<td>1. The teacher asks non-academic questions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. The teacher provides information, individually, to the students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. The teacher gives emotional support to the students.</td>
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Benefits of SDT Approaches

*autonomy & belonging*

- Benefits of **autonomy-supportive** classrooms:
  - ![positive emotionality, academic performance, & academic persistence with a likelihood of dropping out.](image)
  - Pertinent to at-risk youth (for example, students with LD report lower levels of autonomy).
- Benefits of **belonging** need satisfaction:
  - ![self-esteem, empathy, social competence, conflict resolution skills, achievement; & depression & anxiety.](image)
  - Researchers contend that belonging need satisfaction is most important for at-risk students such as those with a history of academic difficulties (Deci et al., 1991).
Benefits of SDT Approaches

(competence)

• Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis (1996) contend that "psychological health depends on ongoing feelings of effectance or competence" & that “the need to feel competence is a basic organismic propensity that underlies self-esteem and self confidence" (p. 1271).

  – Associated with well-being.

  • Students with LD & emotional problems report lower levels of academic competence.
Benefits of SDT Approaches

\textit{(intrinsic motivation & engagement)}

• It has been argued that when students’ psychological needs are met, their SD, which promotes the internalization of external motivations such that students become more \textbf{intrinsically motivated}.
  – Many benefits: including taking on challenges, utilizing skills, & an adaptive pattern of psycho-social functioning.
  – Youth who are delinquent have generalized external motivations; & students with LD have more external than internal attributions.

• \textbf{Engagement} also when students’ psychological needs are met.
  – Associated with \textup{positive emotions, personal adjustment to school, & school achievement.}
  – Low school achievement is associated with conduct disorder, delinquency, & antisocial behaviour.
Photo-Elicitation: What Students Said ...

**Autonomy**
“It’s a picture of [my own] design of a skateboard and it features my own logo;” “Art is a kind of expression... it expresses me”.

**Goal-Setting & Follow-Through**
“That’s what the logo actually looked like on the computer, so I did my best to copy every little detail;” “So I took the challenge and that turned out really well”.

*Skateboard*
Wall Ball

**Competence**
“Getting stronger... whenever I do this. And its especially helping in hockey... I figured out how to skate backwards and to do a transition over from skating forward to skating backwards”.

**Goal-Setting**
“So those were the key components that I needed to learn through hockey because you need to sometimes be on offence and defence”.

Photo-Elicitation: What Students Said ...
Summary

Having needs of autonomy, belonging, & competence met was associated with:

• **Classroom Engagement**- “I felt great after doing it”; “I came back to school... pumped for a new year”.

• **Psychological Well-Being**- “I’m definitely pushing myself and it’s helping”; “[I’ve been] misjudging what I can actually do”.

• **Self-Regulated Learning**- “If I would fall, I would learn from that and try something else. But I figured it out bang on”.
MyPlanner for Youth

• A tool to help youth track their goal-setting & follow-through (& engage in SRL):

http://myplanner.research.educ.ubc.ca/login/index.php
Positive Psychology (PP)

• Sought to remedy negative biases in psychology by focusing on what works well for people as a way of (a) providing a full account of human nature and behaviour; & (b) increasing fulfilment and improving quality of life.

• As applied to education:

  1. Identifying Student Strengths
  2. Students Applying Strengths to New Experiences

*positive outcomes associated with highlighting & fostering strengths
PP Strengths

• Usually refer to **character strengths** & correspond to measures such as the **Big Five**.

• Some have taken exception to this view of strengths:
  – Ignores role of experience in developing strengths & talents.

• Another way to identify strengths: what children are **good at** & what they **like doing**.
Approach to Highlighting & Fostering Student Strengths

• Disparity in approaches taken by schools.
  – Lopez and Louis (2009) identify 5 modern-days principles:

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Measurement</em> of student strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Personalizing students’ learning process through <em>individualization</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Students <em>networking</em> with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Deliberate application</em> of personal strengths</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Intentional development</em> of strengths</td>
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Highlighting Strengths
(from positive psychotherapy)

• Participants:
  1. Completed the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VAI-IS);
  2. Completed a detailed narrative of what they’re good at; &
  3. In collaboration with therapist, devised ways to use strengths in work, love, friendship, leisure.

(Seligman et al., 2006)
Benefits of PP Strengths Approach

• Benefits associated with (1) highlighting strengths; (2) positive affect; (3) using personal strengths.

1. Identifying strengths leads to: classroom engagement, academic expectations, self-esteem, self-efficacy, & positive affect.
   – Important to at-risk youth who experience disproportionate rates of school disengagement, drop-out, self-critical cognitive schemas, & affective disorders.
Benefits of PP Strengths Approach

2. **Positive affect** leads to: ↑creativity; encourages careful, systematic processing, helping to make decision-making more thorough and efficient; and facilitates approach behaviour.

3. **Drawing on strengths** leads to: ↓depressive symptoms; and ↑motivation to accomplish goals & ability to garner social support.
   - At-risk youth have an increased likelihood of experiencing bullying & social withdrawal.
My Dissertation Research

• Another aspect of our case studies.

• **Narrative interviews** with former students of AEPs to learn: (a) about their current circumstances; & (b) whether and how they perceive time spent in an AEP has contributed to their life outcomes.

• At-risk youths’ vulnerabilities persist in adulthood.

• Adds to our research by discovering: whether the variables we’ve been watching influence students’ choices & circumstances beyond the AEP.
• **SDT & PP strengths-based approaches** have a focus on students’ emotional & social needs.
• Why PP strengths-based literature?
Categories of Classroom Features
(*for my dissertation research)

• Based on research on alternative education programs, & from a SDT & PP strengths-based perspective.

• Three categories:
  • 1. relationships
  • 2. student well-being
  • 3. student learning
# 1. Relationships

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Trustworthy &amp; positive <strong>teacher/student</strong> relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td><strong>Mentors</strong> who role-model positive relationships for students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Students part of a close, caring <strong>community</strong> with shared goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Interagency collaboration in the AEP &amp; a shared vision among <strong>stakeholders</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# 2. Student Well-Being

| A | Fostering student **psychological well-being**; resiliency & self-understanding |
| B | A supportive & non-judgemental **learning environment** |
| C | The use of **positive reinforcement** for appropriate, versus punishment for inappropriate behaviour |
## 2. Student Learning

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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Giving students a <strong>sufficient amount &amp; quality of information</strong> about expectations and consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td><strong>Individualizing remediation</strong> to students’ unique needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Encouraging students to take <strong>ownership of their learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Teachers having <strong>pedagogical competence</strong> in a wide range of subject areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Closing Activity

1. Can you think of how **SDT & PP strengths-based approaches** could help meet the **unique needs of your students**, i.e., are there specific practices you could see being especially pertinent/beneficial (discuss in pairs)...
Closing Activity

1. Drawing on the information I presented on PP strengths-based approaches, now, finish these two sentences:
   a) I know [name] is smart because...
   b) To cope in areas I identified as problematic, he/she could use a strength in the following way:
Key References


