

Learning Environment

An Intrinsic Motivational Approach

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Abstract

The lack of fun in learning process has resulted in learning becoming a forced, extrinsically driven activity in contrast to the earlier fun-filled years of learning and growing. Children by nature are intrinsically motivated to learn; this is because they want to learn about the surroundings they live in so that they can deal effectively with the environment. The intrinsic motivation to learn also exists because children want to know about themselves, develop a sense of self-efficacy in order to effectively handle and manipulate the environment. However, this natural curiosity or intrinsic motivation in the child often remains curbed and results in a disinterested student at school. Social psychological impact of educational load and current problems with early childhood education can be understood within the existing psychological theories of personality and motivation. A theory which has been specifically found to be suitable for educational context is Ryan and Deci's Self-determined Theory (SDT). To differentiate autonomous from controlled intentions, Deci (1980) adopted the term self-determination (in contrast to intentions that were externally determined, reward determined, guilt determined, etc.). Analysis of the relationship between schooling experiences and parental expectations and the experience of educational stress can be understood in the SDT framework in which sense of autonomy, self-efficacy or competence and relatedness can be said to affect the degree of internalisation of the motivation for school-related performance which in turn would be related to experiencing educational stress.

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INTRODUCTION

The child who earlier indulged in the act of learning because of the intrinsic satisfaction and motivation that he/she got from learning itself, has now come to bank on the extrinsic rewards first by the parents and the significant others and later by the society at large (in the form of degrees, medals, jobs, awards, etc.). The loss of this intrinsic motivation has cost very dearly to the school-going child. It has taken away all the fun from the learning process. This lack of fun in the learning process has resulted in learning becoming a forced, extrinsically driven activity in contrast to the earlier fun-filled years of learning and growing. Absence of intrinsic motivation has resulted in learning becoming a stressful activity. This stress has gained dangerous dimensions where it is expressed in the form of low self-esteem, worth and efficacy. The result of non-adjustment to this stress sometimes expresses itself as depression and suicide attempts amongst school-going children.

UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATIONAL DYNAMICS OF SCHOOL LEARNING

Motivation refers to the initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of human behaviour. Motivation is a word used to refer to the reason or reasons for engaging in a particular behaviour. These reasons may include basic needs such as food or a desired object, hobbies, goal, state of being, or ideal. The motivation for a behaviour may also be attributed

to less-apparent reasons such as altruism or morality.

Intrinsic motivation is defined as engagement in actions for their own sake with the only tangible benefit being outcomes such as pleasure, learning, satisfaction, interest, or challenge. Extrinsic motivation occurs when learners engage in activities for the purpose of reward from an external source, for example, running a race to win a prize, attaining rewards, such as praise or high grades (Alderman, 1999). Engaging in behaviour to avoid punishment is also regarded as an extrinsic motivation.

There have been several theories of motivation such as need theories and drive theories. None of them however deals with the concept of intrinsic motivation in specific and basically discuss what motivation is and how it can be enhanced. It was later that the concept of intrinsic motivation came into the theoretical framework. "Koch (1956) was the first to make assertions that motivational theory needs to include intrinsic motivation" (Deci, 1975). The concept and some of the theories of intrinsic motivation have been discussed next.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Woodworth (1918) developed the behaviour-primacy theory in which he mentioned intrinsically motivating behaviour. He proposes that one's behaviour is aimed at producing an effect on the environment around. He views people as competent organisms

that act on the environment. He noted that behaviour is capable of producing its own drive like curiosity and self-assertion and constructiveness. These he called 'native equipment' or innate capacity. Allport (1937) talked of 'Functional Autonomy', i.e., an activity which irrespective of its initiating motive can become intrinsically interesting.

Some psychologists believe that a significant portion of human behaviour is energised and directed by unconscious motives. According to Maslow, "Psychoanalysis has often demonstrated that the relationship between a conscious desire and the ultimate unconscious aim that underlies it need not be at all direct". In other words, he stated that motives do not always match those inferred by skilled observers. For example, it is possible that a person can be accident-prone because he has an unconscious desire to hurt himself and not because he is careless or ignorant of the safety rules. Similarly, some overweight people are not really hungry for food but for attention and love. Eating is merely a defensive reaction to lack of attention. Some workers damage more equipment than others because they harbour unconscious feelings of aggression towards authority figures.

Psychotherapists point out that some behaviour is so automatic that the reasons for it are not available in the individual's conscious mind. Compulsive cigarette smoking is an example. Sometimes maintaining

self-esteem is so important and the motive for an activity is so threatening that it is simply not recognised and, in fact, may be disguised or repressed. Rationalisation, or 'explaining away', is one such disguise or defence mechanism, as it is called. Another is projecting or attributing one's own faults to others. 'I feel I am to blame', becomes 'It is her fault; she is selfish'. Repression of powerful but socially unacceptable motives may result in outward behaviour that is the opposite of the repressed tendencies. An example of this would be the employee who hates his boss but overworks himself on the job to show that he holds him in high regard.

Intrinsic motivation is the natural inclination towards mastery, spontaneous interest, assimilation and exploration that is so essential to social cognitive development and that represents a principal source of enjoyment and vitality throughout life (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 1993; Ryan, 1995).

ENHANCING INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Some researchers believe that intrinsic motivation can be enhanced through the use of particular strategies, and have sought to correlate the design of specific educational materials and an increase in learning performance. Thus far, studies have found no evidence to establish that the interest value of material is a determinant—as opposed to a consequence—of learning (Parker and Lepper, 1992). However, some useful strategies that

can promote intrinsic motivation have been proposed. Lepper and Hodell (1989) suggest the following four methods for enhancing intrinsic motivation

Challenge: Design challenging activities which convey the message to the learners that they have competitive skills. It is essential to find a balance between learner competence and the difficulty of the goals. Overly difficult goals are unlikely to increase learner motivation to continue the task as the learners perceive they will never reach the goal. Likewise, goals that are too easily attained do not sufficiently challenge learners to encourage skill development.

Curiosity: Activities that create disequilibria for the learners can elicit curiosity. Presenting discrepant ideas—those that conflict with their prior knowledge or beliefs—can prompt students to seek information that will resolve the discrepancy. As with challenge, moderate discrepancies are most effective because they are easily incorporated into an individual's mental framework; large discrepancies may be rapidly discounted (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996, p. 277).

Control: A sense of responsibility will be better fostered in learners if they are allowed to make meaningful choices in the learning process.

Fantasy: The design of simulations and games that involve fantasy can increase intrinsic motivation.

Unconscious motives add to the hazards of interpreting human behaviour and, to the extent that they are present, complicate the life of the administrator. On the other hand, knowledge that unconscious motives exist can lead to a more careful assessment of behavioural problems. Although few contemporary psychologists deny the existence of unconscious factors, many do believe that these are activated only in times of anxiety and stress, and that in the ordinary course of events, human behaviour—from the subject's point of view—is rationally purposeful.

Researchers found that some intentional behaviours were initiated and regulated autonomously when the person was intrinsically motivated, whereas in other cases they were initiated and regulated by coercive and pressurising environment and intrapsychic forces (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

Table 1
Approaches to Intrinsic Motivation and their Primary Proponents

| Approaches | Proponents |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Drive naming | Montgomery, 1954 |
| • Exploratory | Harlow, 1953 |
| • Manipulation Sensory | Isaac, 1962 |
| • Visual | Butler, 1953 |

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| Optimal Incongruity (psychological processes) | Hunt, 1955; Dember and Earl, 1957 |
| Optimal arousal (physiological processes) | Hebb, 1955 |
| Uncertainty reduction | Kagan, 1972; Festinger, 1957 |
| Competence and self-determination | Deci et al., 1973 |

Source: Deci (1975, p. 58).

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AND EDUCATION

Children by nature are intrinsically motivated to learn; this is because they want to learn about the surroundings they live in so that they can deal with the environment effectively. The intrinsic motivation to learn also exists because children want to know about themselves, develop a sense of self-efficacy in order to effectively handle and manipulate the environment. However, this natural curiosity or intrinsic motivation in the child often remains curbed and results in a disinterested student at school. One of the important ways that have been seen to be effective in sustaining and nurturing this intrinsic motivation is by leaving the child free of the external rewards and punishments (Bruner, 1962). It is found that giving reward and punishment to children leads them into a pattern of doing things and this pattern leads to 'learning' being viewed as something they do for the sake of the reward it brings. As cognitive evaluation theory says, the locus of causality of learning which originally is internal gradually becomes external through reward and punishment. Bruner states "... to the

degree that one is able to approach learning as a task of discovering something rather than 'learning about' it, to that degree there will be a tendency for the child to work with the autonomy of self-reward or, more properly, be rewarded by discovery itself" (1962, p. 88). The intrinsically motivated child in the long run learns to interpret success and failure as information, rather than reward and punishment and is therefore less ruled and hence not stressed.

Contemporary educational system has burdened the children so much that it has affected their mental health and has changed their lifestyle totally. Most of their time is spent on academic activities and the remaining time is spent on several other structured activities of learning such as dance or a musical instrument. The rigid time-bound and disciplined way of doing nearly everything around the child has made activities and specially education very mechanical. Moreover, the increase in number of rules, do's and don'ts in a child's life has made things very externally determined. The joy of just doing things or intrinsic motivation is totally lacking. It is partly because

of this that schooling and education have become a burden to the child as they are externally determined. The self-determination theory discusses intrinsic motivation and its role in education.

Social psychological impact of educational load and current problems with early childhood education can be understood within the existing psychological theories of personality and motivation, etc., such as Bandura's theory of personality and self-efficacy concepts like competence, mastery and locus of control also help in understanding the processes of stress in early childhood education and the impact of the same on children's mental health (Bandura, 1993). A theory which has been specifically found to be suitable for educational context is Ryan and Deci's self-determined theory (SDT). To differentiate autonomous from controlled intentions, Deci (1980) adopted the term self-determination (in contrast to intentions that were externally determined, reward determined, guilt determined, etc.).

SUMMING UP

One can sum up the preceding review, to suggest that mental health and stress among students, particularly those in the adolescence phase and facing major school-related burden and pressure of examinations can be understood from a motivational perspective. Among the various approaches to student motivation, the SDT by Ryan and Deci (2000) seem

to be quite promising in offering a framework of motivational dynamics in terms of variables like self-esteem, competence, sense of autonomy and relatedness.

Analysis of the relationship between schooling experiences and parental expectations and the experience of educational stress can be understood in the SDT framework in which sense of autonomy, self-efficacy or competence and relatedness can be said to affect the degree of internalisation of the motivation for school-related performance, which in turn would be related to experiencing of educational stress. Ryan and Deci suggest that children's school experience is both a cause and consequence of the degree to which they assume agency of their academic endurance, or the degree to which their academic efforts continue to be regulated by external contingencies of reward and punishment. To the extent that children are able to perceive the outcomes of academic effort as externally controlled, they will lead to a sense of uncertainty and stress. However, the closer the child moves towards the direction of internal self-regulation and intrinsic motivation, the better would he/she be able to ascribe school-related effort to internal satisfaction and interest. Thus, persistence in academic tasks can be clearly related to the degree of intrinsic motivation amongst students.

The SDT recognises the inevitable condition of academic performance

as externally regulated. That school performance could continue to be associated with external reward conditions such as marks and grades and tangible future returns, is an inescapable aspect of modern schooling. Therefore, assumption of internally driven agency is not possible by simply negating or ignoring the external contingencies, rather as SDT suggests, it is necessary to internalise through cumulative processes of introspection and self-regulation to progressively internalise the causation of academic effort. In other words, while emphasis on marks/grades, competition and other indicators of school success is a fact of modern school experience, the key to a sense of well-being and moderate stress experience of children lies in the extent to which conditions favourable for motivational internalisation are available to children.

According to SDT, the degree of internal regulation of any motivated action springs from three need sources—autonomy, competence and relatedness—to the extent that the child has a sense of self-efficacy, belief in one's competence and perception of self-esteem. A child would be prone to deriving internal satisfaction and assuming greater autonomy, when perception of self-efficacy, competence is higher. As has been discussed earlier, a number of studies show a clear relationship between competence and intrinsic motivation. Apart from the theoretical formulations of Ryan and Deci (2000) and the empirical

research in the SDT framework, there is also a substantial body of literature relating to overlapping concepts such as self-efficacy as in Bandura's theory discussed earlier and self-esteem, relating them to intrinsic motivation and sense of well-being (Bandura, 1993). It is also necessary to appreciate that agentic self-perception is possible only when a person's actions are perceived to be under internal rather than external control. The more one is able to take initiatives and feel that he/she is able to decide, engage in or refrain from specific action, the more would be the sense of self-control and agentic belief. Thus, when a classroom experience is such that a child is able to exercise independent choice, it would promote a greater degree of internalisation. Independent choice would be reflected in the belief of self-control. In the SDT, this as a source of internal self-regulation comes from the perception of autonomy. When a child feels that s/he has some autonomy in engaging in classroom and academic activities, greater internalisation of the motivational contingencies would be possible. Thus, the degree of intrinsic motivation in academic activities would depend on the extent to which a child's academic environment is autonomy supportive. Such autonomy support is primarily related to two sources for a school-going child. Sense of autonomy in classroom activities is related to the degree to which the teacher is able to create a classroom wherein the pupils feel that they have some independence

and initiative in engaging in specific academic activities. Thus, an autonomy supportive classroom is likely to lead to higher levels of intrinsic motivation. The other source for autonomy perception is the family itself. Parenting styles are known to be either authoritarian or liberal and parents either exercise greater control over child's actions or allow the child a greater freedom of choice. When a child perceives autonomy, rather than parental control, agentic self-belief would lead to intrinsic motivation. Thus, autonomy support both in the family and classroom is a major contributing factor to the degree of

internalisation in academic efforts. The third need, state Ryan and Deci, relating to intrinsic motivation is the need for a sense of relatedness. A greater degree of interpersonal relationships and a sense of security in the availability of social support would facilitate greater degree of intrinsic motivation. Thus, SDT offers a framework to understand how the experience of academic stress and internal motivation are inter-related through the mutual interacting effect of the three contributing factors in the child's environment, namely autonomy, competence and relatedness.

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