

Motivational Dynamics of Educational Stress

RUCHI SHUKLA*

Abstract

One can understand educational stress by examining how the different need aspects of intrinsic motivation are interrelated and how they function to mediate the level of experienced stress by individual students. Analysis of the relationship between schooling experiences, parental expectations and the experience of educational stress can be understood in the Self-determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 1985) 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.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health and stress among students, particularly those in the adolescent phase, facing major school-related burden and pressures of examination (Class IX to XII), can be understood from a motivational perspective. Among the various approaches to student motivation, the Self-determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (1985) seems to be quite promising in offering a framework of motivational dynamics in terms of variables like self-esteem,

competence, sense of autonomy and relatedness. Self-determination as a concept means internally controlling one's behaviour, acting on the basis of personal beliefs and values rather than on the basis of social norms or group pressures.

The SDT, when applied to education, is about fostering in students an interest in learning, a valuing of education and a confidence in personal capabilities (Deci et al., 1991). According to this theory, students become actively engaged in educational activities to

*Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Psychology and Foundations of Education, NCERT.

the extent that classroom endeavours affirm their competencies and prove them to be interesting and relevant to students' lives. The basic needs of competence and self-determination explain the motivational source underlying students' experiences of becoming interested in school and internalising school-related values. As needs, both competence and self-determination represent energising states that, if nurtured, facilitates interest, enjoyment, engagement and well being (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Competence represents the need for seeking out optimal challenges and for perceiving oneself as efficacious in mastering those challenges. Self-determination represents the need to experience choice in the initiation and regulation of one's behaviour, such that the students' choice rather than environmental events determine their action (Deci and Ryan, 1985.). Thus, to promote an interest in learning, valuing of education and an affirmation of personal capabilities, educational climate need to find a way to support students' need for competence and self-determination.

WHAT IS SELF-DETERMINATION AND HOW IT IMPACTS ACADEMIC STRESS?

According to SDT, students become engaged in school-related activity when instructional activities are interesting and relevant to their lives, and affirm their competencies, that is, perceptions of self-determination and competence constitute students' internal motivational resources

that support their engagement and persistence in school. Such school activities result in a sense of achievement and knowing that mastery brings joy. Through play, a child gets the confidence to say "I can do it for myself", which illustrates the link between emotions and learning, between cognitive (thinking) and affective (feeling) experiences (Pringle, 1974). One important role teachers play in helping students develop these internal motivational resources is through the provision of autonomy supportive classroom, which support and nurture students' needs for self-determination and competence. There is also a third psychological need emphasised in addition to self-determination and competence, namely relatedness. Relatedness also explains some of the motivational underpinnings of students' engagement and commitment of school (Goodernow, 1993; Ryan and Powelson, 1991; Skinner and Belmont, 1993). Thus, the Self-determination Theory very explicitly shows what exactly is needed by the child and how the educational system can provide it to them.

The review of literature relating to SDT and also the studies seeking to relate specific variables with mental health, well-being and stress clearly show that one can understand educational stress by examining how the different need aspects of intrinsic motivation are interrelated and how they function to mediate the level of experienced stress by individual students. Analysis of the relationship

between schooling experiences, 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 (2000) 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 the child is 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 into the direction of internal self-regulation and intrinsic motivation, a child would ascribe school-related effort to internal satisfaction and interest. Thus, persistence in academic task 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 competitive grades 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.

HOW DOES SELF-DETERMINATION WORK IN EDUCATION?

According to the 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 (1985) and the empirical research in the SDT framework, there is also a substantial body of literature relating overlapping

concepts, such as self-efficacy as in Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) discussed earlier and self-esteem, relating them to intrinsic motivation and sense of well-being. 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 to feel that one 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 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 one 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-beliefs 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 i.e., the need for a sense of relatedness, state Ryan and Deci (2000) pertaining related to intrinsic motivation. 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 interrelated through the mutual interacting effect of the three contributing factors in the child's environment, namely autonomy, competence and relatedness.

The relationships between competence, autonomy and intrinsic motivation and its impact on the experienced academic stress and school performance.

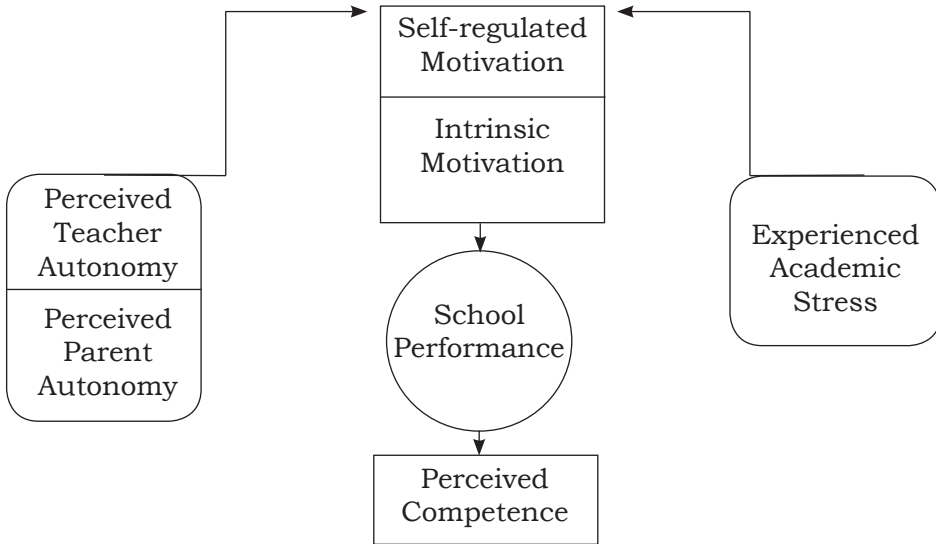


Figure 1. A Motivational Model of Experienced Academic Stress

REFERENCES

- BANDURA, A. 1977. Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change. *Psychological Review*. Vol. 84, No.2. pp. 191–215.
- DECI, E.L., AND RYAN, R.M.1985. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-determination in Human Behavior*. Plenum, New York
- _____. 1991. A Motivational Approach to Self: Integration in Personality. In R.Dienstbies (Ed.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*: Vol. 38, Perspectives on Motivation, pp. 237–288. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln
- GOODERNOW. 1993. Classroom Belonging among Early Adolescent Students. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*. Vol. 13, No.1. pp. 21–43.
- PRINGLE K.M. 1974. *The Needs of Children: A Personal Perspective*. Accessed online https://books.google.co.in/books?id=6a7_ag6GaowC&pg=PA1&source=gbs_selected_pages&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false
- RYAN, R. M., AND C. L. POWELSON, 1991. Autonomy and Relatedness as Fundamental to Motivation and Education. *Journal of Experimental Education*. Vol. 60, No.1. pp. 49–66.
- RYAN, R. M., AND DECI, E. L. 2000. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*. Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 54–67.
- _____. 2000. Self-determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-being. *American Psychologist*, Vol. 55, No.1. pp. 68–78.
- SKINNER, E. A., AND M. J. BELMONT. 1993. Motivation in the Classroom: Reciprocal Effect of Teacher Behavior and Student Engagement across the School Year. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Vol. 85, No.4. pp. 571–581.