

# **Creating Optimal Learning Environments through Invitational Education: An Alternative to Control Oriented School Reform**

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## **Introduction**

The importance and benefits of developing an intentionally positive school climate are often overlooked as education policy makers focus on accountability mandates that are increasingly control-oriented. Such school reforms often negatively impact the intrinsic motivation of educators and their students, while also unintentionally sabotaging the intended goals of the reform initiatives themselves (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Control-oriented reforms can impact the self-concept, motivation, and effort of today's American students, teachers, and administrators. Many outside our school walls say these controls are necessary as educators, parents, and policy makers want students to have strong literacy and computation skills and be creative problem solvers and innovative leaders in our world. Consequently, high stakes assessments for educators, students, and schools are often put in place in an effort to realize these goals (Rizga, 2015). However, these types of initiatives serve as extrinsic controls, used in part to motivate people to change their behavior and improve results. The problem is that these controls may have unintended consequences: they can actually reduce intrinsic motivation and limit the amount of attention one has to accomplish the task at hand—especially a task that requires higher level thinking and creativity (Deci, 1995).

Understanding what motivates people to put forth effort, persevere in the face of obstacles, and choose their behaviors is key to creating an optimal learning environment—the type of school that policy makers desire, but are unknowingly sabotaging (Dweck, 2000). Many motivation and self-concept theories provide important insight with regard to the negative consequences of control-oriented reforms.

This article proposes sharing the key concepts of motivation and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan 1985) and invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1996) with policy makers to highlight the negative impact of control-oriented reforms and make the case for a more positive approach to transforming schools by applying these theories of practice. Educators may not be in a position to remove top down controls. However, when they model and intentionally implement an invitational framework to address school reform, both student and staff motivation, effort, engagement, and academic success may increase. Sharing their successes may help policy makers realize that control-oriented school reforms are ineffective in achieving lasting and effective change in schools.

As a viable and more positive alternative, the invitational framework provides strategies to create a high challenge/low threat school climate that helps both staff and students realize their full potential.

## **Self-Determination and Intrinsic Motivation**

Rather than bemoaning the current state of affairs, let us embark on a more optimistic approach by sharing information that will help educators and policy makers understand how control-oriented approaches—whether imposed by government regulations or the teacher in a classroom—actually work against their intended goals. Key concepts of self-determination and invitational theories, with over 40 years of research and application, will guide this exploration.

The concept of intrinsic motivation refers to “the process of doing an activity for its own sake, of doing an activity for the reward that is inherent in the activity itself” (Deci, 1995, p. 21). Early on in Deci and Ryan’s (1985) writings they stopped labeling actions like offering rewards or threatening negative consequences as extrinsic motivators, and instead labeled them as controls. They contend that these actions are used to control the behavior of another person. Motivation is not something that is done to people. Rather it is something that comes from within a person.

While it is easy for educators to see and feel the negative impact of today’s reform efforts, it is important to recognize that extrinsic controls have been used in teaching practices for many years. Teachers use threats, such as the loss of points on an assignment grade, and rewards like homework passes, prizes, and treats to attempt to motivate their students to work hard. The problem with external controls, however, whether in the form of a reward or punishment, is that they actually sabotage intrinsic motivation. According to Deci (1995), “not only do controls undermine intrinsic motivation and engagement with activities but—and here is a bit of bad news for people focused on the bottom line—they have clearly detrimental effects on performance of any tasks that require creativity, conceptual understanding, or flexible problem solving” (p. 51).

As children, we start our lives filled with a natural tendency to enthusiastically explore our world and increase our skills. However, as we enter school and each year of learning becomes more and more prescribed, there are fewer choices for students and their teachers. The problem of people becoming more passive and less responsible for their learning (or work) is frequently related to the fact that they have less control or ownership. Control-oriented approaches also make it difficult for teachers to effectively implement strategies that include independent learning activities. According to Woolfolk (2007): Students come to see the purpose of school as just following rules, not constructing deep understanding of academic knowledge. And complex learning structures such as

cooperative or problem-based learning require student self-management. Compliance with rules is not enough to make these learning structures work. (p. 447)

It makes sense then, for the first lesson in creating successful schools to be about understanding motivation and how to invite students to take control of their own learning. Instead of asking how we can motivate teachers and students to work differently or harder, a more beneficial question might be, “How can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves?” (Deci, 1995, p. 10).

Prominent psychologists and researchers have been telling educators about intrinsic sources of motivation for nearly a half century. The importance of choice and personal control rings loud and clear in works such as Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*; Deci’s (with Flaste) (1990) *Why We Do What We Do: The Dynamics of Personal Autonomy*; Dweck’s (2000) *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development*; Maslow’s (1954) *Motivation and Personality*; Purkey and Novak’s (1996) *Inviting School Success*; and Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons’ (1992) *Self-Motivation and Academic Attainment*. The more policy makers and educators ignore these findings, the more our schools struggle. In contrast, infusing their wisdom into our intentional practice may bring about the development of the challenging and supportive environments that educators, students, and parents desire. Deci and Ryan’s (1985) *Self-Determination Theory* identifies three conditions that will foster intrinsic motivation and engagement for activities, including enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity. These conditions are the following:

- Autonomy: The need to be the causal agent of one’s own life and act in harmony with one’s integrated self;
- Competence: Being effective in dealing with the environment in which a person finds oneself;
- Relatedness: The desire to interact, be connected to, and experience caring for others; a connection to something larger than oneself.

The authors maintain that these natural tendencies do not operate automatically as they require ongoing social support. The social context (everything and everyone around the learner) can either support or thwart a person’s feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Government and business leaders, educators, parents, and basically anyone in a “one up” position sometimes choose to use an extrinsic reward or punishment when they feel the need to control another person’s behavior. They “assume that the promise of a reward, or the threat of punishment will make the offenders comply” (Deci, 1995, p. 1).

Deci and Ryan's (1985) extensive research demonstrated that offering people extrinsic rewards for a behavior that is intrinsically motivated, undermines their intrinsic motivation and actually causes productivity and creativity to decrease. As a result, a person's limited attention becomes focused on the reward, leaving less attention available to address the task at hand.

In one of Deci's (1971) earlier studies, a group of people received a monetary (extrinsic) reward for solving puzzles, while another group received no reward. When the set time for the activity ended, the two groups remained in their rooms, with the puzzles and a variety of magazines. The people who were working towards the monetary reward stopped working on the puzzles. The people who were never promised any reward continued to work on the puzzles and actually created more shapes during the timed portion of the experiment, demonstrating their intrinsic motivation and full attention on the task. In the case of the group that was promised money, an otherwise intrinsically motivated activity became controlled by the external reward. This study demonstrated that when we use a control oriented approach, we unintentionally hinder a major condition for motivation.

Deci (1995) categorizes behavior as either controlled or autonomous:

When autonomous, people are fully willing to do what they are doing, and they embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment. Their actions emanate from their true sense of self, so they are being authentic. In contrast, to be controlled means to act because one is being pressured. When controlled, people act without a sense of personal endorsement. Their behavior is not an expression of the self, for the self has been subjugated to the controls. In this condition, people can reasonably be described as alienated. (p. 2)

In other words, when we provide our students with opportunities for choice, they may respond with interest and commitment as people tend to be more vested in an activity that they have chosen to do. In contrast, when we use controlling approaches, students may respond with compliance or defiance. The more we rely on controls, the more we alienate.

The similarities to the current approach to school reform are obvious. Years of increased mandates and mounting controls are causing a conundrum: government officials want students to be creative problem solvers, but the pressure they place on school leaders makes the school leaders use more controlling approaches with their teachers thus stifling teacher choice and creativity. The pressure on teachers makes them use more controlling approaches with their students, undermining the students' motivation, creativity and

conceptual understanding. Instead of the mission being accomplished, the mission is unintentionally sabotaged (Deci, 1995).

While educators are often not in a position to remove top-down controls, a productive way to eliminate the need for them is for educators to become intentionally less controlling in their own actions and to understand how their words and actions influence the self-concept and behavior of others. If we commit to modeling and communicating the benefits of being intentionally inviting from the bottom up, our success will eventually reduce and even eliminate the need for top-down controls (Purkey & Novak, 1996). Teachers can provide the conditions within which students will be intrinsically motivated to learn, and their success may prompt policy makers to provide these same conditions for our educators to thrive.

Ask any student what makes them want to work hard in a class and they may likely identify the teacher's choice of words or behavior that either helped or hindered them. They may mention things like whether the teacher provided some choice as to how to do an assignment, or with whom they could work (autonomy). They may describe the encouraging comments the teacher made that helped them feel more competent, as well as the discouraging ones that made them feel unable to handle the class, or the way the teacher temporarily lowered the bar to help them experience success (competence). They may talk about a teacher with whom they felt a deep connection, a bond that developed between the students in a class, the way they could not stop working on a project that resonated with them, or the satisfaction they felt working on something greater than themselves (relatedness.) Whether words or actions are used intentionally or not, students can tell if a teacher thinks they are able, valuable, and responsible or not. When teachers create the right conditions, intrinsic motivation kicks in and a student's effort soars (Deci, 1995)).

Not everything that happens in school will be intrinsically motivating. As administrators, parents or teachers, we often find ourselves trying to convince others to do things they have no interest in doing. Deci (1995) suggests that "the real job involves facilitating their doing the activities of their own volition, at their own initiative, so they will go on doing the activities freely in the future when we are no longer there to prompt them" (p. 92). It is not so much what you are asking someone to do, but how you present it that can make the difference.

According to Deci and Flaste (1995), the key is to guide the person to internalize the activity – to turn an external prompt into an internal prompt. Whether it's encouraging someone to memorize multiplication tables or put out the garbage at home, it helps to:

- Provide a rationale for the person to choose to do the uninteresting activity. It

might help them to work towards something they are interested in attaining, feel connected to a group, or avoid other undesirable problems. Pointing out the benefits to them, not to you, is important.

- Acknowledge that the person may not want to do what they are being asked to do. Simply acknowledging people's feelings helps prevent the requirement from undermining their motivation.
- Use a style of language that involves minimal pressure. The request should be more like an invitation instead of a demand, emphasizing choice rather than control. (Deci, 1995, p. 101)

Providing a rationale, acknowledging feelings and minimizing pressure will encourage people to integrate the behavior and do it of their own free will. On the other hand, when we use a demanding or threatening approach, people may respond by either being merely compliant or overtly defiant. In this case, they have not integrated the behavior as part of their true selves because they did not willingly choose the behavior. It was forced upon them. The goal is to provide opportunities for people to internalize regulations and accept them as part of how they choose to behave (Deci, 1995, p. 94) without manipulation.

### **An Alternative Approach: Invitational Theory and Practice**

How do schools create the balance that is needed? Adults, in the many positions they hold in schools, can create an optimal learning environment by sharing a positive mindset and performance culture. Invitational Theory and Practice, developed by William Purkey, with Betty Siegel and John Novak in the late 1970s, provides a framework for such intentional practice. Inviting teachers assume:

1. People are able, valuable and responsible, and should be treated accordingly.
2. Educating should be a collaborative and co-operative activity.
3. The process is the product in the making.
4. People possess untapped potential in all areas of worthwhile endeavor.
5. This potential can best be realized by places, policies, programs, and processes specifically designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting to themselves and others, personally and professionally. (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 3)

Invitational Education provides educators with a systematic way of communicating positive messages that develop potential as well as identifying and changing those forces that defeat and destroy potential. According to Purkey and Novak (1996), "This understanding of the depth and breadth of messages is used to develop environments and ways of life that are anchored in attitudes of respect, care, and civility and that encourage the realization of democratic goals" (p. 4).

Every day we receive thousands of internal messages from our experiences and from the people with whom we interact. We interpret each message as being either positive or negative. These messages influence what we believe to be true about ourselves and our abilities, and help to shape our self-concept. Using this information, we then choose our behaviors to protect, maintain, or enhance our self-concept. Thus, what we believe to be true about ourselves influences every behavioral choice we make (Purkey & Novak, 1996).

Inviting educators understand the powerful influence that their words and actions have on the development of a student's or colleague's self-concept. They intentionally communicate optimism, respect, trust, and care. Instead of presenting people with demands, they invite them to consider beneficial choices of behavior. Purkey and Novak (1996) suggest that "trust develops as a result of successive levels of positive and beneficial experiences" (p. 42). Thus, these positive relationships build confidence and encourage people to accept challenges, put forth effort, and explore new ideas and opportunities. In short, inviting educators practice a doing with instead of a doing to approach to teaching. They "focus their energies toward finding ways to successfully summon people to see themselves as able, valuable, and responsible and to behave accordingly" (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 12).

Creating an invitational environment involves applying these intentional practices to the people, places, policies, programs, and processes of the school. Every adult in the school is encouraged to develop inviting practices and every component of the institution is examined for how it messages students, staff, and parents. Thus, using Invitational Education as a framework for transforming schools will create the three conditions needed for educators and students to be intrinsically motivated: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). With these conditions in place, policy makers might no longer be compelled to impose extrinsic controls to achieve the results they desire. Educators just might break the cycle of increased mandates and control oriented reforms by:

- Informing policy makers how creating the conditions for intrinsic motivation will increase their students' perseverance, creativity, conceptual understanding, and flexible problem-solving skills, and why control oriented reforms sabotage these goals;
- Modeling invitational practices in our role as a member of the school staff;
- Examining our policies and practices to insure that we provide our colleagues and students with opportunities for choice, competence, and relatedness.

### Conclusion

Motivation and self-concept theories offer profound insights to educators who strive to provide optimal environments for teaching and learning. Implementing an invitational framework for professional practice may lead us into an era in which intentionally positive

climates become the norm, and the public's perceived need for control-oriented mandates becomes unnecessary.

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