

Motivating Students Who Encounter Difficulties in Learning

By Frédéric Guay, Canada Research Chair in Motivation, Perseverance, and School Success, Université Laval

Providing effective support to motivate students with learning disabilities (LDs) is a significant challenge for anyone who teaches or provides services for such students. These students find it difficult to put in place strategies or behaviours that enable them to learn at the same pace as other students in one or more school subjects, and thus often become discouraged and see themselves as incompetent. In fact, research indicates that students with LDs are more likely to feel that they are “not very good” at school (e.g., Bear, Minke & Manning, 2002). In addition, these students tend to attribute their difficulties to personal shortcomings (Sideridis, 2009) and some of them even come to think that when they succeed, this has nothing to do with the efforts that they have made, but instead depends on chance (Nunez et al., 2005). This article addresses the way in which educators can foster the motivation of students who encounter difficulties in learning. Contrary to some beliefs that these students require closer, and even controlling, support to engage in their learning, research findings show that the opposite is true. In the following sections, academic motivation and its consequences are defined, as well as the psychological needs conducive to motivation and the instructional practices that meet these psychological needs.

Academic Motivation and its consequences

Motivation is considered an energy reserve that is directed toward achieving a goal (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Academic motivation is not a personality trait that can be used to describe a student as being motivated or unmotivated. On the contrary, academic motivation varies between students and even within any given student. Sometimes it is high, and at other times, it is lower. For example, a student can be motivated by the content of one subject but can have very little motivation for another. Although motivation is in part innate (Kovas et al., 2015), we nevertheless have ways to increase it, particularly in connection with the tasks assigned to students and the educational context in which they are learning.

When we discuss motivation, we are mainly seeking to understand the reasons behind a given behaviour or action. For example, Max and Penelope can have different reasons for engaging in mathematical tasks. For Max, his engagement is the result of fear that his parents will scold him if he does not make an effort to meet the expectations of these tasks, whereas Penelope's engagement is based solely on the pleasure she feels when learning. According to self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017), the reasons underlying the learning of our two protagonists are not equivalent; Penelope has a greater chance of succeeding in math than Max does. Why is this? The reason is that Penelope's behaviour is more self-determined. Self-determination theory proposes different types of motivation that vary according to their level of self-determination, and this self-determination appears to be associated with the development of the students' skills. Self-determination refers to being the driver of our own actions, without any internal pressure (performance anxiety) or external pressure (threats) regulating our behaviour.

Self-determination theory proposes five (5) types of motivation:

The lowest level of self-determination is **amotivation**. In this motivational state, **the student does not see any reason to engage in school activities**. This motivational state can result from a lack of interest in school or even a feeling of incompetence.

At a slightly higher level of self-determination, there is **external regulation**. This type of motivation refers to learning behaviours that are achieved **to obtain a reward or avoid a punishment**. For example, Matthew can read because his parents promised him a certain amount of money for each book read (reward) or to avoid failing his English class (punishment).

Another type of motivation that is a little more self-determined is **introjected regulation**. At this level, a person displays behaviours with the **goal of presenting a positive self-image to others, being noticed, or avoiding unpleasant emotions such as shame, anxiety, or guilt**. For example, if Julie spends many hours studying for her mathematics exam in order to reduce her performance anxiety, she is displaying introjected motivation.

The next type of motivation, **identified regulation**, is even more self-determined. A student who is driven by this type of motivation **believes it is important to carry out learning activities and to develop their competencies**, even if a particular activity is not always interesting. For some students, learning the multiplication tables is a boring activity. However, if the student considers this learning important for accomplishing different mathematical operations in the future, they may be more motivated to learn their multiplication tables now.

Finally, **intrinsic regulation** is the most self-determined form of motivation. It is defined as the **inherent pleasure and satisfaction that the student takes in their learning**. A student who is intrinsically motivated by mathematics may, for example, ask their parents to purchase games for them to practise resolving different mathematical operations.

The motivations defined above are situated on a continuum of self-determination from the lowest to the highest. In order, we, therefore, have amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation and finally intrinsic regulation. Displaying behaviours based on self-determined motivations is more beneficial for developing a person to their full potential, including children who struggle at school. **Self-determination is like a small internal compass that tells us if we are staying on the path to developing to our full potential.** If this compass tells us that our behaviours are motivated by intrinsic regulation or identified regulation, then our chances are good for attaining this full potential. On the other hand, if our compass tells us that our behaviours are amotivated or are motivated by introjection or external regulation, our chances of attaining this full potential are more jeopardized. Does this “motivational” compass function relatively well? Based on current research, the answer is yes. In fact, a meta-analysis that includes hundreds of samples covering more than 200,000 students distributed throughout several countries (Howard et al., 2021) shows that students who are motivated intrinsically and through identified regulation are more successful in their studies, persevere more, and are more satisfied with their school paths compared to students who are amotivated or regulated extrinsically or by introjection. There are therefore benefits to properly setting our motivational compass but also knowing which direction our students’ compasses are pointing. And that is precisely the question at hand—how can we be sure that this compass is working well? What actions do we need to undertake to help students become more positively motivated?

Psychological needs that are conducive to academic motivation

The way that a compass works is relatively simple. The needle is attracted by the magnetic pull of the Earth’s North and South Poles. For the compass to work, an external force is therefore needed to make the needle move. Human motivation works somewhat in the same way.

For a person to develop more self-determined motivation (intrinsic and identified), it is important to nurture the universal psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and social belonging. SDT puts forward that these needs are essential for the development of all human beings. They are an important safeguard to keep people from losing their bearings. Like

physiological needs, if psychological needs are not fulfilled or are even frustrated, a person can experience serious problems with their motivational compass and therefore with developing to their full potential.

The **need for competence** refers to feeling competent in the activities that we undertake. This is a subjective impression the student has of their own abilities. Some students tend to overestimate their competencies, while others underestimate or have a realistic view of their competencies. Students who are struggling do not seem to be an exception to this reality. Not all struggling student underestimate their competencies—they can also overestimate or accurately estimate their competencies. While some students may present an overconfident image of themselves in order to protect their ego (Klassen, 2002), overestimating their abilities can prevent students from acquiring strategies that will enable them to improve. It is therefore important to set things back on track in this respect.

The **need for autonomy** is defined as our desire to be the driver of our own actions and behaviours, free of any pressure, whether internal (guilt) or external (a reward). It is important not to confuse a lack of pressure with a lack of rules. On a daily basis, children live with rules at school and at home, and these are beneficial for their development. These rules do not necessarily conflict with having their need for autonomy met. While they have no actual interest in brushing their teeth or making their bed, many children have integrated these rules in a fully self-determined way.

Finally, **the need for relatedness** is defined as maintaining positive, significant, and warm relationships with others that are reciprocal. When these three needs are met, the result is more self-determined behaviour regulations, including intrinsic regulation and identified regulation. On the contrary, when these needs are frustrated, the result is external regulation and introjected regulation, and even motivation.

According to a meta-analysis of the role of psychological needs in the development of the academic motivation of students (Bureau et al., 2022), it would seem that meeting the needs for autonomy and competence is important for supporting more self-determined academic motivation. The need for relatedness plays a reduced role in explaining self-determined motivation.

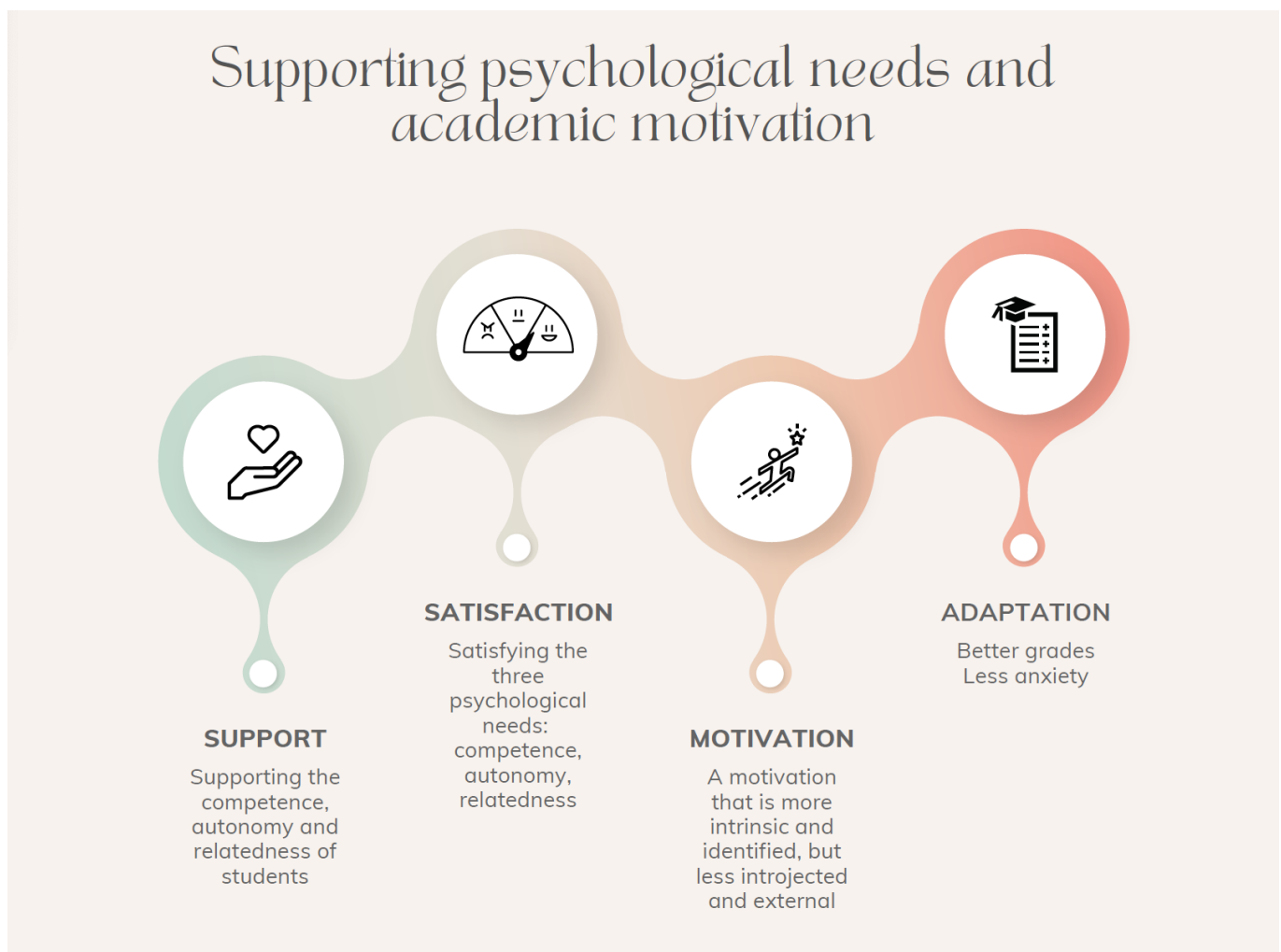
For the students' motivational compass to indicate the right path to follow, it is important, even fundamental, to provide an environment that allows students to meet their three psychological needs. Without such an environment, the motivational compass will point towards introjection,

external regulation and even amotivation, which are more or less optimal motivations for developing the students to their full potential. As their needs are increasingly frustrated by the environment, students are likely to become more “amotivated.”

Below are a series of behaviours and practices that will help satisfy each of your students’ psychological needs and lead to self-determined motivation. Special attention will be given to students with learning disabilities as the three psychological needs can more easily be frustrating for these students.

Supporting the psychological needs of your students

The following practices focus primarily on the ways teachers can support self-determined motivation but can be adapted by parents and other school staff for other settings.



Supporting the need for competency

To provide effective support for competency, it is first necessary to believe in your own competency and understanding. That your actions can help students to better succeed. If your actions do not bring the expected results, they must be improved. The progression in learning does not rest solely on the shoulders of the students, but also on our capacity as educators to adapt to students' needs.

When we speak of support for competence, we are primarily referring to the feedback that we provide to students. Feedback is defined as information given by an educator regarding a student's performance or understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). To reduce the gap between the student's current performance and their expected performance, feedback must prove to be "useful". The information provided to the learner must be sufficiently specific so that they can improve or understand why they met the success criteria. Comments such as "you did a great job, congratulations," or "you are really gifted" are not very informative and do not help the student to understand which strategies they put in place for attaining success. The reverse is also true when students encounter difficulties. For example, a student has trouble multiplying whole numbers that have more than two digits. The teacher points out the errors, without spending time on the process of finding a solution. The teacher attributes the student's errors to inattention. In such a case, the error will be repeated, as it is the result of a poorly understood strategy.

Students benefit from feedback when it:

1. Helps them understand the mistakes that they made,
2. Why they made the mistakes, and
3. How they can avoid similar mistakes in the future.

(Wisniewski, Zierer & Hattie, 2020).

For example, a student who has to write an argumentative text could use a text produced by another student as a template for their own work. However, if the text that is used as a template is not broken down by the teacher into steps and adapted to the students' level of competence, this template will have very little impact on the written production of the student. For a template to increase the motivation of students encountering difficulties, it must represent an achievable level of success. Next, during the writing process, the teacher needs to model the strategies and to provide constant feedback to help the student to improve.

Supporting the need for autonomy

When dealing with a child who has an LD, our responses cannot be the same as for students who do not have such difficulties. We frequently think that the best way to help children succeed at school is to control them by threatening them with certain consequences, or by promising them a reward. This also happens at home. Parents of children with reading difficulties may become discouraged when their child avoids reading and then resort to promising them a reward as an incentive to read. As if reading more was the best strategy to remedy these problems! If a child avoids reading, it might be because they do not understand what they are reading because they lack vocabulary, or because they have dyslexia or a developmental language disorder (DLD). Reading more because of receiving a reward is not a solution for these problems. A reward does not provide specific feedback and it does not provide any information to the child about which strategies to use to facilitate their understanding. In short, a reward-based motivational strategy should normally be avoided. What should be done then? It is important to support the need for autonomy of students who encounter difficulties. Autonomy support refers to providing students with certain choices, acknowledging their feelings, and putting your trust in them regarding their ability to be proactive in their learning.

To support the students' autonomy, the teacher needs to explain to students why certain rules have been put in place, why the concepts learned are important, or why they are being asked to carry out certain educational activities. Supporting autonomy is also teaching concepts in an environment that is significant for the student, where work is performed not for the sole purpose of being evaluated by the teacher, but because it has a real impact in the child's life. Many research studies have shown the importance of authentic learning situations for increasing student motivation.

Educators need to cultivate the pleasure of learning and, if applicable, to assign differentiated tasks that spark the interest of each child. Many studies (Bureau et al., 2022) have shown that supporting autonomy is important to foster academic motivation. Furthermore, it seems that teacher autonomy support is more important than parent autonomy support for developing a motivation to learn. Conversely, control wielded through rewards and punishments does not effectively enhance motivation, unless the tasks that are given are not at all or not very interesting, and the skills deployed are not very complex. Evidence-based data suggests that (Deci et al., 1999) teachers are advised not to put in place a reward system in their classroom, but rather to improve the quality of the task and the learning environment. This is more likely to promote the emergence of self-determined motivation.

Supporting the need for relatedness

Students attach importance to the quality of the relationships that they have with their teachers and their peers in the classroom. Often, during a transition from one school to another, the students' goal is not to pass their courses, but to make friends and to feel accepted by adults in a position of authority. When students have positive relationships at school, more self-determined academic motivation ensues (Guay, Denault & Renaud, 2017). How can teachers go about nurturing this need for relatedness in students?

One of the very first pillars is to demonstrate caring behaviours and to show students that they are important to us both in their academic lives and in other aspects of their lives. Conflicts with students should be minimized, as well as rejection, which can manifest in the teacher as anger, irritability, and hostile behaviours (Hofkens & Pianta, 2022). With this in mind, a teacher who has experienced a difficult situation with a student is encouraged to take a little time with them to find solutions to the conflict. This attention can make all the difference for maintaining, and even enhancing, a student's self-determined motivation regarding school (Humphrey, 2003). Nevertheless, we know teachers feel under time pressure. When students have not reached the desired level of competence, teachers are often tempted to give more time to students to learn, perhaps to the detriment of the time that they could have invested in developing a quality relationship.

Take, for example, a student who disturbs the class with disruptive behaviours and who has unfortunately developed a poor relationship with their teacher. In order to restore a quality relationship between the student and the teacher, it is important for the teacher to spend time with them to resolve the conflict, and to try to understand why the student is behaving in this way. Are difficulties preventing them from engaging in their activities? It is important for educators to show students that they are available to help, that they understand their difficulties, and that they will try to find solutions with them. Providing more positive feedback could also help the student to engage more in their school activities. In short, it is important for the teacher to break the ice to rebuild a more positive relationship. However, to accomplish this intervention with the youth, educators require time and resources to help them, and these are not always available.

Conclusion

In this text, we provided an overview of the importance of self-determination and motivation and we highlighted the motivational deficits that can occur in students with learning disabilities.

In addition, we defined three psychological needs and showed how they can be supported effectively by teachers. In the light of the learning difficulties encountered by some students, it is essential to create an environment that is conducive to the development of all students to their full potential.

Engaging in conflict with students or controlling them is certainly not the key to helping them progress. Struggling at school is tough for children if the people supporting them are controlling. Students will have the impression of being doubly punished, will feel very competent due to their poor academic results, and possibly hear direct or indirect comments from others that exacerbate these feelings. For students encountering academic difficulties, support for autonomy, competence and relatedness are important ingredients that can provide the necessary motivation to learn.

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About the Author:



Since 1998, Frédéric Guay has been a professor in the Faculty of Educational Sciences of Université Laval. In 2005, he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Western Sydney. He holds the Canada Research Chair (Tier 1) in Motivation, Perseverance and School Success. Recently, he was recognized by the Whitworth Committee for his contribution to research in education in Canada. In 2014, he was elected as Chair of the Division of Educational, Instructional, and School Psychology of the International Association for Applied Psychology. Finally, he is the author of 100 scientific articles, book chapters and books, and has presented more than 200 scientific papers at

national and international conferences. The vast majority of these publications and papers pertain to the academic motivation of students.