

Re-centering Teaching: Becoming an Autonomy-supportive Teacher

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Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching

Warner School of Education and Human Development

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December 2023



Table of contents

Summary	1
Biography	2
Introduction	3
Self-determination theory	4
Why is SDT suitable for my purposes?	4
Autonomy-supportive teaching	6
The seven autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors	7
<i>Take the students' perspective</i>	8
<i>Invite students to pursue their personal interests</i>	10
<i>Present learning activities in need-satisfying ways</i>	11
<i>Provide explanatory rationales</i>	12
<i>Acknowledge and accept negative feelings</i>	14
<i>Rely on invitational language</i>	16
<i>Display patience</i>	18
Comparison with chaos, control, structure and autonomy support.....	19
Future considerations	21
Limitations and barriers to autonomy-supportive teaching	22
Special considerations for language learning	24
Application and implementation as a Fulbright teacher	25
References	27
Appendices	30



Summary

Working as a language teacher in Finland for several years, I have had a growing concern for the lack of motivation and engagement more and more students seem to have. There is a need to re-center teaching, to move the focus from teaching and the teacher to learning and the student. There is a need to find ways to engage and motivate each individual student to take responsibility and ownership for their own learning process, to help them find the joy and meaningfulness of learning again. Self-determination theory offers great tools for this.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a motivational theory created by psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci. Ryan and Deci (2017) believe that human behavior aims for the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. When students feel that they are in charge of their learning process, fully engaged, and part of a group, they get a sense of meaning and purpose. This all leads to intrinsic motivation and internalization (Ryan et al., 2023). Autonomy-supportive teaching is a teaching style within the framework of SDT. It consists of seven autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors: take the students perspective; invite students to pursue their personal interests; present learning activities in need-satisfying ways; provide explanatory rationales; acknowledge and accept negative feelings, rely on invitational language; and display patience (Reeve et al., 2022). These behaviors offer practical tools for teachers who wish to study the framework further.

The goal of this paper is to provide a theoretical background for the purpose of creating a professional development workshop for teachers. I have adapted the principles of the autonomy-supportive teaching style and used them as a basis for a lesson plan structure (Appendix A). This structure will later be an important part of a workshop for teachers who wish to develop their teaching skills towards a more autonomy-supportive way of teaching for the benefit of their students and themselves.



Biography

Ms. Heidi Niskanen is a teacher of English (as a foreign language) and Swedish (as a second official language) from Finland. She has been a teacher for 17 years and has experience of teaching in kindergarden, in elementary school and in secondary school. Niskanen currently teaches in Juhani Aho School in Iisalmi, in Central Finland. Her school is a lower secondary school, and her students range in age from 13 to 16 years old. There are about 750 students and 80 staff members in the school. In addition to working with teenagers, Niskanen also teaches evening classes for the nearby Kaskikuusi Adult Education Center. During the past few years, she has specialized in private tutoring and online teaching for various language needs.

Heidi Niskanen has had a key role in starting and developing European cooperation in the schools that she has worked in. In her current school she has the main responsibility for Erasmus+ projects (funded by the European Union). This means applying for funding, managing the projects, providing teachers with opportunities for professional development in Europe, and hosting visitors from abroad. Through Erasmus+, Niskanen herself has also attended many in-service training courses in various countries in Europe. This has allowed her not only to develop her professional skills but also to connect with schools and teachers.

Niskanen has a master's degree in English from University of Jyväskylä, Finland (2006). Her minor subjects were Swedish language, Pedagogical Studies, Intercultural Communication and Special Education.



Introduction

Can you still remember what it felt like to learn to read for the first time, to ride a bike for the first time, or to skate for the first time? Do you remember the feeling of joy you felt in that moment? In my work, as a language teacher of middle school students in Finland, I have noticed that too many students have lost this joy of learning. They only come to school because they have to, and a growing number of students are not able to finish comprehensive education in the intended nine years. There is a need to re-center teaching, to move the focus from teaching and the teacher to learning and the student. There is a need to find ways to engage and motivate each individual student to take the responsibility and ownership for their own learning process, to help them find the joy and meaningfulness of learning again. Self-determination theory offers great tools for this.

In this paper, I will explore self-determination theory by giving an overall view on the theory explaining why it has a lot of potential for classroom use. Furthermore, I will especially focus on one of its key concepts called autonomy-supportive teaching. I will introduce seven autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors for teachers and compare this teaching strategy with other teaching strategies, such as, chaos, control, and structure. The main goal of this paper is to offer practical step-by-step guidance for teachers who want to become more autonomy supportive. In the appendices, I will introduce a lesson plan structure based on the guidelines of the theory. I will also consider limitations of the theory for classroom use and name special considerations for language learning.

This inquiry project was done as a part of the Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching program at Warner School of Education and Human Development, at the University of Rochester. I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor Dr. Sarah Peyre (the Dean of Warner School) who first introduced me to self-determination theory and devoted a lot of time and effort in supporting my project and helping me to face the challenges along the way.



Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a motivational theory created by psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci while working together at the University of Rochester. Ryan and Deci (2017) believe that human behavior aims for the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Competence “refers to our basic need to feel effectance and mastery” (p.11). Individuals feel motivated if they think that they are capable of doing the tasks at hand. Relatedness is the feeling of being part of a group and feeling needed and accepted in that social context. Autonomy is “the need to self-regulate one’s experiences and actions” (p.10). This means that people take control over their actions, are interested in the tasks they participate in, and are fully and voluntarily engaged in them. The word “flourishing” is often connected to the theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan et al., 2023). Ryan et al. (2023) state that flourishing “refers to the blossoming of capacities and wellness” (p. 591) and specify that “it is a developmental term to indicate that growth and integrity are occurring in the life of a student” (p. 591). Flourishing is the goal I have for my students in the classroom and that has led me to explore motivation and the ways to maintain and enhance students’ motivation.

Why is SDT suitable for my purposes?

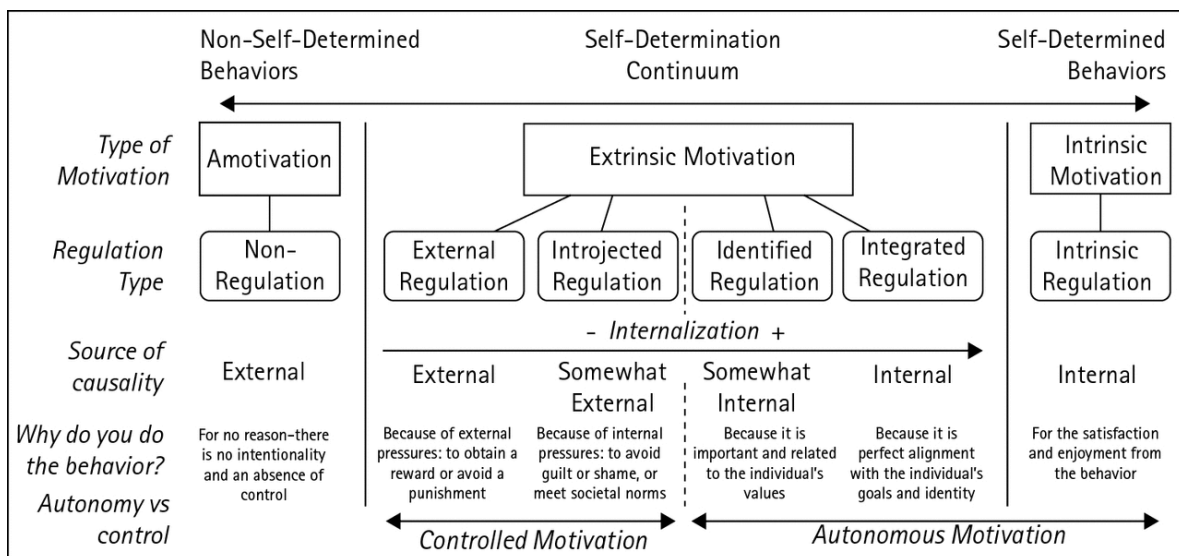
It is widely considered that a students’ overall well-being is an essential component of their foundation for education. Self-determination theory examines how students’ flourishing can increase when they are motivated, hence having a direct connection and importance to education. Ryan et al. (2023) explains that when students’ basic needs are met in the classroom, students become more engaged, and this leads further to greater need satisfaction. When students feel that they are in charge of their learning process, fully engaged, and included in a group, they get a sense of meaning and purpose. This all leads to intrinsic motivation which is



defined as “motivation based on the inherent satisfaction of acting, learning and growing” (p.593) and internalization which is defined as “the active tendency of individuals to assimilate and integrate social practices, norms and values around them” (p.593). It is often considered that intrinsic motivation tends to decline over the school years (Gillet et al., 2012; Gottfried et al., 2007; Scherrer & Preckel, 2019, as cited in Ryan et al., 2023). Thus, we teachers need to pay a lot of attention to keeping that motivation going. Moreover, Noels (Chirkov, 2009; Nalipay et al., 2022, as cited in Noels, 2023) mentions that “the relation between autonomy, competence, relatedness and academic achievement appears to be culturally universal” (p. 625-626). In other words, taking care of these three basic needs leads to better learning results everywhere in the world.

Figure 1

Self determination continuum and influencing factors



Note. From Sarraxin et al., 2011, as cited in Rocchi & Pellettier, 2023, p. 62.

Ryan and Deci (2017) explain that SDT includes motivation types on a scale which are explained by six overlapping mini theories. On one side of the scale, there is controlled motivation and, on the other side, autonomous motivation. This is very applicable to school environment where students’ motivation is too often driven by external factors, such as, exams.

The six mini theories of SDT include: cognitive evaluation theory, organismic integration theory, basic psychological needs theory, causality orientations theory, goal contents theory, and relationships motivation theory. Each of these mini theories provide detailed descriptions on the roles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as how they should be considered on a continuum. Figure 1 presents a pictorial representation of the self-determination continuum that illustrates this concept.

Autonomy-supportive teaching

Autonomy-supportive teaching is a teaching style. According to Reeve et al. (2022) autonomy “is the need to feel personal ownership during one’s behavior” (p. 62). They explain that autonomy is something we are born with, and the task of teachers is to support and encourage this inherent desire students have for taking action. If this is not done, motivation will decline, and can even be pushed aside (e.g. by teachers’ indifferent or controlling actions). Al-Hoorie et al. (Howard et al., 2021, as cited in Al-Hoorie et al., 2022) states that a link has been found “between autonomous motives and the promotion of learning, well-being, and persistence in school, as well as, the prevention of negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and dropout” (p. 4). This supports the concept that autonomy-supportive teaching practises can really make a huge difference and impact on students’ motivation and performance.

Reeve (2016) introduces two goals for autonomy-supportive teaching. One is to give the students a chance to engage in meaningful learning tasks in an encouraging environment. The other goal is to build a relationship with students in which learning and dialogue work both ways. Unfortunately, not all teachers are willing to try becoming autonomy-supportive teachers. According to Reeve et al. (2022) there are three characteristics for teachers who see the value of the autonomy-supportive teaching style. These are personality, culture, and desire

for professional development. Personality refers to being open to new experiences and having a desire to strive for personal growth. Culture refers to values, priorities, ideals, expectations, and definitions of success. Lastly, desire for professional development is simply having a goal-oriented attitude and willingness to make a little bit of extra effort in order to help students. To improve classroom environments that support student motivation, a good strategy could be to help more teachers adopt an autonomy-supportive teaching approach.

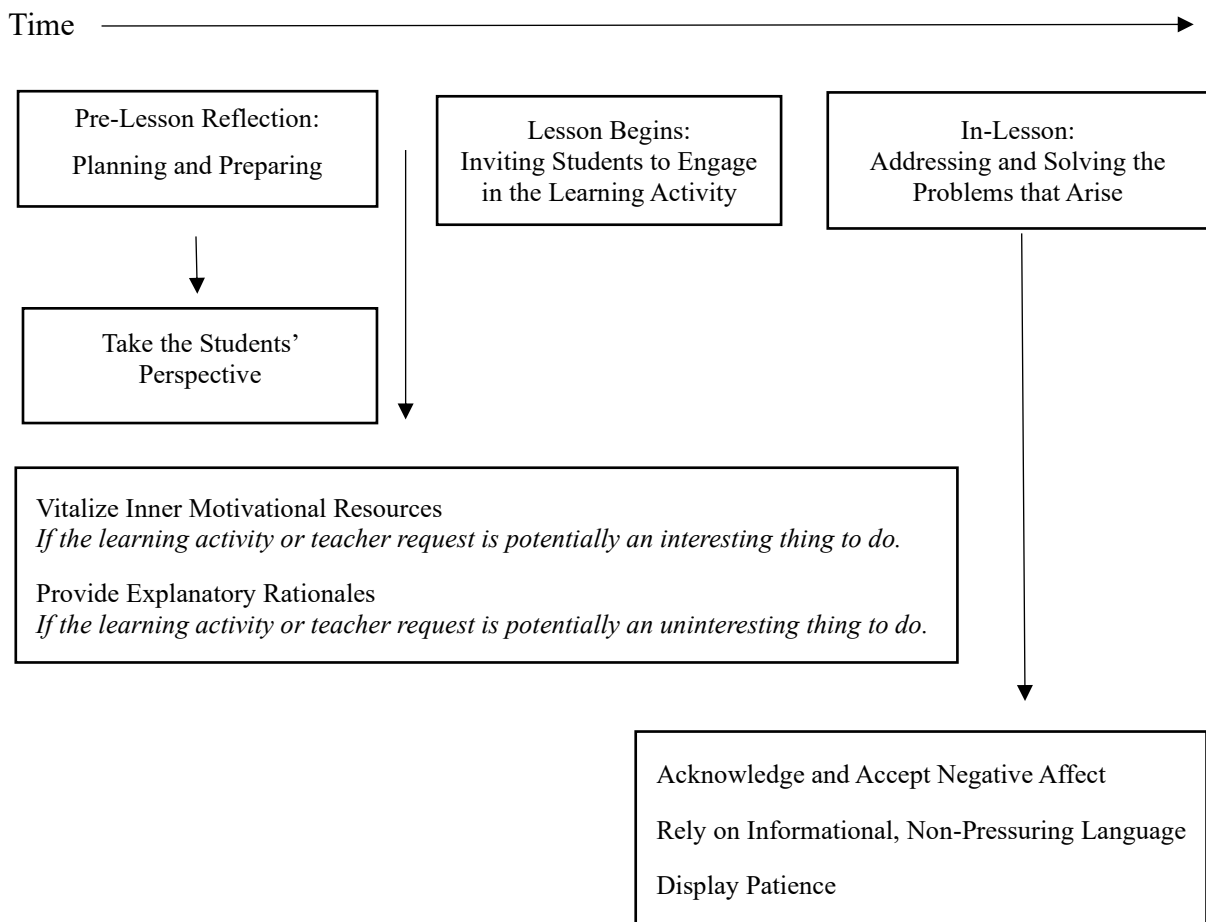
The seven autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors

Ryan et al. (2023) declares that autonomy-supportive teaching consists of “instructional behaviors that facilitate students’ intrinsic motivation and inherent developmental propensities” (p. 594). Reeve (2016) mentions six instructional behaviors that are components of autonomy supportive instruction: take the student’s perspective; vitalize inner motivational resources; provide explanatory rationales for requests; acknowledge and accept students’ expressions of negative affect; rely on informational, nonpressuring language; and display patience. In a later book by Reeve et al. (2022) he expands this list to cite seven recommended autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors: take the students perspective; invite students to pursue their personal interests; present learning activities in need-satisfying ways; provide explanatory rationales; acknowledge and accept negative feelings, rely on invitational language; and display patience. As I consider how to improve my own teaching, as well as support the development of my teacher colleagues, understanding specific instructional strategies is important. In Figure 2, Reeve (2016) introduces “three critical motivational moments in the flow of autonomy-supportive teaching” (p.136) which I have also later used as the basis for my lesson structure, while implementing the seven strategies above. (see Appendix A). Using this framework will help me organize the seven strategies as I explore them in more detail. The

first three behaviours can be seen to aid intrinsic motivation. The last four accompanied with taking the students’ perspective enhance internalization (Reeve et al., 2022).

Figure 2

Three critical motivational moments in the flow of autonomy supportive teaching



Note. From Reeve, 2016, p. 136.

Take the students’ perspective

Taking the students’ perspective is an important part of teacher’s reflection and planning at the pre-lesson stage (see Figure 2). The teacher needs to consider if the students will perceive the “lesson to be need-satisfying, curiosity-provoking, interesting, and personally important” (Reeve, 2016, p. 137). One might ask how this can be done since teachers are not mind-readers. Reeve (2016) invites teachers to use their previous teaching experience as a basis for this

reflection or encourages teachers to observe “students’ needs, wants, goals, priorities, preferences, and emotionality” at the same time taking into consideration “potential obstacles students may face that might create anxiety, confusion, or resistance” (p. 137). Reeve et al. (2022) also suggests having a dialogue with the students and asking them about their preferences. If a direct oral discussion is not possible, the teacher can use, for example, an exit card or an anonymous digital equivalent.

Teaching is traditionally very teacher oriented. If teachers only look at things from the teacher’s perspective, they ignore the student’s point of view. According to Reeve et al. (2022), teacher’s perspective involves actions such as giving orders without a good reason; making an effort to replace students’ negative feelings without listening to why students are feeling that way; and not giving students enough time to complete their tasks. In this kind of environment, there is no room for the ownership of the student. Reeve et al. explains that acknowledging the student’s point of view, on the contrary, involves actions such as explaining why something is done, taking students’ negative emotions into account, and letting them work according to their own pace. Reeve et al. (2022) summarizes these actions into three steps:

“Step 1: Ask the students what they think, want, and feel

Step 2: Provide an opportunity for students to voice their perspective (i.e., to say aloud what they think, want, and feel)

Step 3: Adjust the lesson accordingly (to integrate students’ preferences)” (p.51)

What are the benefits of taking the students’ perspective? Reeve et al. (2022) states that there are three most important gains: helping to keep up students’ motivation in class, enhancing the relationship between the teacher and the students, and taking the first step into transforming into an autonomy-supportive teacher.

Invite students to pursue their personal interests

Inviting students to pursue their personal interests means taking into account their previous knowledge and current preferences. Reeve (2016) talks about “vitalizing students’ inner motivational resources”. “Vitalizing students’ inner motivational resources entails using instruction as an opportunity to awaken (involve) and nurture (satisfy) students’ psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as students’ curiosity, interest, and intrinsic goals” (p.138-139). As shown in Figure 2, this happens before the lessons begins. Reeve et al. (2022) later in their book divide this into two separate instructional behaviors: inviting students to pursue their personal interests and presenting learning activities in need satisfying ways. Reeve (2016) highlights that the critical moment in teaching happens when the teacher invites students to participate in a learning activity or ends an activity and moves on to another activity. The students need to feel that the task in hand is truly something that they want to do.

Student’s personal interests can be found via using their intrinsic motivation. According to Reeve et al. (2022) intrinsic motivation “is the motivation to engage in an activity out of interest and enjoyment” (p. 60). When students use their intrinsic motivation, they are, for example, willing to challenge themselves into thinking and manipulating information and developing themselves as learners. “When students feel personal ownership over their behavior (autonomy), effective in what they are doing (competence), and accepted and loved by those around them (relatedness), they experience and display high intrinsic motivation.” (p. 61). The key is to ask the students what they find interesting and to provide activities or teaching strategies that students find engaging. Reeve et al. (2022) points out that the level of intrinsic motivation changes according to how satisfied or frustrated the students are with the tasks at hand. Therefore, it is important to try to support this need satisfaction throughout the lesson. Teachers can monitor this by looking at the students’ classroom vitality. If they stay motivated,



they engage fully, if not, the teacher starts to see signs of disengagement, amotivation, or different behavioral problems.

Present learning activities in need-satisfying ways

This instructional strategy needs to be taken into consideration when planning the lesson but also when introducing students the agenda for the lesson. If the teacher thinks that students will be interested in the activities, the activities need to be introduced in a way that satisfy students' basic needs (Reeve, 2016). In order to support autonomy, the teacher can offer choices to students. This creates ownership. Reeve et al. (2022) mentions examples of the different types of choices as well as ways to satisfy students' basic needs. The teacher can make the students choose what kind of product they want to make (e.g. poster, presentation, video), the teacher can ask if they want to work alone or with someone else, or the teacher can prepare differentiated activities and ask the students to choose their level. In order to satisfy students' needs for competence, the teacher can offer challenges and help the students to tackle those challenges by offering assistance. Students need to have the feeling that they can do what they are asked to perform. In order to make the students feel related, the teacher can provide an objective that the students need to reach together. While pursuing a common goal students need to feel accepted and that they can offer something to the group of people they work with. In Table 1, Reeve (2016) also talks about three additional inner resources that come into play when talking about motivation and need satisfaction. These are curiosity, interest, and intrinsic goals.

As teachers we know that following the curriculum means that we sometimes need to make students do something that is perhaps not that attractive in their opinion. Reeve et al. (2022), however, highlights that “almost any educational activity...can be made to be more interesting and enjoyable by presenting it in a need-satisfying way” (p. 72) and providing

choices is one way of doing it. Offering choices is, nevertheless, not always easy. Reeve et al. (2022) talks about things that need to be taken into consideration when offering choices. Choices need to support autonomy and be meaningful from the students’ perspective. Students need to have enough information before they make their choice and the alternatives offered can’t be bias in a way that the teacher actually wants the students to choose their favorite. If the choices make no difference or there are too many choices, the students simply won’t choose.

Table 1

Six engagement fostering inner motivational resources that all students possess

Autonomy	The need to be the origin of one’s behavior. The inner endorsement of one’s thoughts (goals), feelings, and behaviors
Competence	The need to interact effectively with one’s environmental surroundings – to seek out optimal challenges, take them on, and exert persistent effort and strategic thinking to make progress in mastering them
Relatedness	The need to be involved in warm relationships characterized by mutual concern, liking, and acceptance
Curiosity	A cognitively generated emotion that occurs whenever students become unaware of an unexpected gap in their knowledge that they wish to close
Interest	An engagement-fostering emotion that occurs whenever students have an opportunity to learn something new or to develop greater understanding
Intrinsic goals	Personal strivings that produce psychological need satisfaction during their pursuit. An inward focus to pursuit personal growth or closer interpersonal relationships

Note. From Reeve, 2016, p. 140.

Provide explanatory rationales

One of the most common questions students ask is ‘What do I need this for?’. If teachers fail to answer this question in a way that satisfies the student, it is hard for the students to maintain their motivation and interest. Sometimes the teacher knows that something that needs to be covered or done won’t be of much interest to the students. In this case “the critical autonomy-supportive instructional behavior becomes to provide explanatory rationales” (Reeve, 2016, p. 139). An explanatory rationale is, thus, simply a way of explaining to students



why engaging in the activity and performing it as well as possible is worth doing (Reeve, 2016). Learning to develop the motivation to change your behavior or engage in activities that are not that interesting but still valuable, is a skill that people need in life (Reeve, 2022).

Reeve (2016) mentions a few skills that need to be considered when giving students explanations. The teachers themselves need to know why they want students to do something. When the teacher has formed a rationale, it needs to be presented to the students in a way that the students will accept it. For example, giving the unfortunately common explanation that students will need the information in an exam, is not a satisfying rationale from the students' point of view. The rationale needs to give students new information that they are not aware of. And the most important thing is that the explanation needs to happen before the teacher asks the students to perform a task. When the students accept the rationale, they internalize it (Reeve et al., 2022). Internalization "is discovering the value in an activity or in a way of behaving" (p.83). The relationship of the student and teacher is the key to this. Reeve et al. continues by saying that "Generally speaking, students will accept and take in the requests, values, beliefs, and behaviors of those they trust ("I know you only want what is best for me"), while they tend to reject and push away the values, beliefs, and behaviors of those they do not ("You are just trying to get me to do and believe what you want")" (p. 83). Vasteenkiste et al. (2018) mentions some goals that meaningful rationales can target. If the students feel that the activity in hand can develop their skills, enhance their achievement, help in making friends, or help them to assist others and get satisfaction from that, then they will find the motivation to complete the task. Reeve et al. (2022) also invites teachers to let the students form their own rationales. This can be done by asking the students to identify the importance or usefulness of the task.

Acknowledge and accept negative feelings

The lesson has started. The teacher has presented the agenda for the lesson and provided the satisfying rationales. Students get to work. As teachers know, there are still multiple ways how the lesson can go wrong. That is why teachers need to be prepared to face arising problems in autonomy-supportive ways. In Table 2, three classroom problems are introduced.

Table 2

Three frequently encountered categories of students’ classroom problems

Disengagement	Students show insufficient involvement to profit from the learning activity. Students are off-task, display little or no effort, use only superficial learning strategies, fail to participate, and are merely passive recipients of instruction
Misbehavior	Students act in maladaptive, immature, or antisocial ways. Students are irresponsible, unprepared, and aggressive and cheat, curse, tease, utter disrespectful language, break rules, skip class, smoke cigarettes, fail to complete their assignments, and show delinquency
Poor performance	Students perform carelessly or incompetently. Students produce sloppy, careless, or lackluster work. Students underperform standards or expectations

Note. From Reeve, 2016, p. 144.

Reeve (2016) highlights that it is important for the teacher to pay attention to the problems that arise and accept the students’ point of view, the feelings that they are going through. Sometimes the problem might be caused by the different interests that students and teachers have at that moment. The teacher wants to get started with the activities, but the students are more interested in talking about something else. For example, in my own experience, I know that if something has happened to the students during recess, it is no point starting the instruction until that issue has been solved or at least addressed. Students appreciate that the teacher acknowledges their feelings and this created a sense of team spirit. In addition to having different interests, students might also express that they are not happy with what they are asked to do, show a negative attitude, or even refuse to do something (Reeve, 2016). Classroom situations are not always straightforward and easy to deal with. For example, I have



noticed that there is a fine line between showing dissatisfaction or just bad behavior. Bad behavior as such should not be tolerated.

Reeve (2016) acknowledges that students' negative emotions usually affect the teacher as well and an understandable reaction from the teacher's part is to defend, try to change how the students are feeling, or use control and make the students do what they are supposed to do. He suggests that teachers should instead take time to talk to students with an understanding tone. This is because blaming students or even humiliating them cannot lead to a positive result. Reeve et al. (2022) sees complete withdrawal from the task as a way of getting rid of the negative affect and, thus, this behavior should be interpreted as a very clear sign of a lack of motivation. In fact, Reeve et al. (2022) identifies four very common results of conflicts in the classroom:

1. "The teacher is frustrated – because the negative feelings persist or intensify.
2. The students are frustrated – because they have been judged negatively.
3. The negative emotion may intensify, spread to other students, and recur again tomorrow.
4. The teacher-student relationship slips toward conflict (i.e., me vs. them)." (p. 94-95)

They suggest that teachers take the time to find out why the student is feeling that way. This talk should be actually considered a useful tool to find out why students are not motivated or do not want to participate. In fact, Reeve et al. introduces three steps that teachers can take in addressing negative feelings. First, talk to the students and tell the students what you see happening. Second, ask the students to identify the problem and be tolerant and have empathy for the students' feelings. Third, ask the students to suggest a solution to the problem or work together to tackle the problem. A very important issue here is that teachers do not need to accept

bad behavior or change the whole agenda of the lesson, but instead, find ways together with the students to address the negative feelings.

Similarly, teachers also need to keep in mind that positive feelings and moment of success need lots of attention. Reeve et al. (2022) points out that “To flourish, students need their classroom experiences of positive feelings to outweigh their classroom experiences of negative feelings” (p. 101). There should be three positive encounters with feelings of thankfulness, enjoyment, and attentiveness to substitute one negative experience when students do not feel capable, do not want to engage, and feel that they are not supported in what they do (Fredrickson, 2009, as cited in Reeve et al., 2022).

Rely on invitational language

Using invitational language means welcoming students warmly to engage in the learning activities. According to Reeve (2016), invitational language refers to the word choices, the tone of voice, and the nonverbal communication the teacher uses when talking to students. Invitational language is usually considered to be the opposite of pressuring language. Invitational language comes in handy especially when the teacher asks students to do something, gives them feedback, or tries to solve problems. Reeve et al. (2022) compares invitational language with pressuring language. Invitational language includes phrases such as “You might consider...”, “May I suggest...”, “When you are ready...”, and “It’s your decision...” whereas when using pressuring language teachers might say “You have to...”, “You are required to...”, “You must obey...”, or “If you don’t, then...” (p. 104). They also mention that teachers, who are autonomy-supportive, use only invitational language. This is a way of offering the students’ choice and ownership. On the contrary, the language of controlling teachers is full of directives and commands and is often further strengthened with gestures and facial expressions.

Table 3

Six Defining Characteristics of Autonomy-Supportive Change-Oriented Feedback

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1. Empathic
The teacher acknowledges that the task is difficult and the obstacles are many.
 2. Accompanied by Choices of Solutions to Correct the Problem
The teacher offers two or three problem-solving solutions and then lets the student choose the one he or she most prefers.
 3. Linked to a Clear Objective
What the teacher suggests is linked to a clear objective or goal.
 4. Paired with Tips
The feedback is accompanied by tips in how to improve future performances.
 5. Free of Student-Related Statements
The feedback describes the behavior and what is happening. It is free from all personal attacks on the student as a person.
 6. Considerate Tone of Voice
The teacher avoids yelling and a disrespectful tone.
The teacher is careful not to ridicule the student in any way.
-

Note. Carpentier & Mageau, 2013, 2016, as cited in Reeve et al., 2022.

Another term used to describe autonomy-support is informational language. Reeve et al. (2022) states that in problematic situations, when students need guidance, language used should be informative. Informational language gives students tools and strategies to explain their obstacles, accept them, and find a solution. This helps them in keeping their motivation and volition. Offering guidance in problematic situations or task performances is similar to giving feedback. Feedback is an essential part of the teaching profession. Reeve et al. (2022) talks about corrective feedback or change oriented feedback. They acknowledge that when giving students feedback, it usually leads to students changing their behavior, but also often have negative effect on both for the students' perception of themselves and for the relationship between the teacher and the student. Reeve et al. (2022) offers six strategies for giving autonomy-supportive feedback. "When teacher provide change-oriented feedback in this way, students tend to react by experiencing higher need satisfaction (not higher need frustration), greater (not lower) self-confidence, and a better (not impaired) teacher-student relationship"

(Carpentier & Mageau, 2013, 2016, as cited in Reeve et al., 2022, p. 109). Those six characteristics are presented in Table 3.

Display patience

Teachers feel a lot of pressure with time. Lessons tend to be short, and the curriculum requires teachers to cover a lot of content. Thus, teachers sometimes feel the need to push students to work faster. According to Reeve (2016) the concept of displaying patience means giving the students the time that they individually need to get through the whole process of engaging in an activity all the way from setting goal and planning to analysing feedback. This requires tolerance from the teachers, tolerance to patiently wait and offer guidance only when students request it and are willing to accept support. “Teachers watch and observe, but they do not interfere, intrude, or intervene” (p.147). Reeve makes a comparison with teachers who display patience and teachers who are impatient. Restless teachers rush the students verbally and can also use body gestures to further strengthen their message. If students have to hurry, this affects their motivation and makes the student lose the chance for learning.

Patience is not only connected to performing tasks, it also needs to be present when the teacher wants a student to change their behavior. Reeve et al. (2022) introduces a list of goals students need to achieve when readjusting their behavior: “overcome the inertia of inactivity, explore and find new information and new role models, ask questions, formulate and test new hypotheses as to what might work, or work best, make new plans and set new goals, collect new data, process feedback, try out new strategies, reflect on how the attempted behavior change is going, revise one’s thinking, try something new and different and, if necessary, start all over again” (p. 115). They consider important that teachers take the students’ perspective, trust the students, and accept the student no matter how successful or not successful the behavior change is. Reeve et al. also talks about directive support. However, according to them,



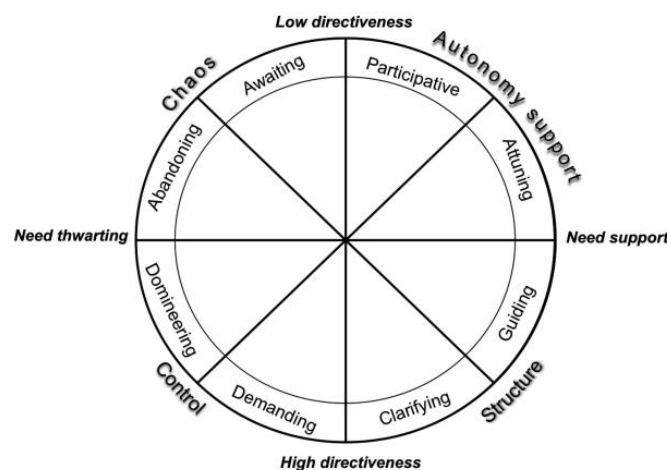
directive support involving constant reminders about the objectives and things that should be done, is not as useful as autonomy support. Directive support gives the students the feeling that the teacher is the one in charge and leaves little room for students' ownership. In the same chapter Reeve et al. explains how the learning of new things is often teacher-led. They conclude that "While it makes sense for initial learning to be teacher-focused, it makes sense that re-learning is best when it is student-focused and teacher-supported" (p.117). Thus, the best way to help the students is to offer both patience and support.

Comparison with chaos, control, structure and autonomy support

I think it is important for teachers to identify and reflect on what kind of teaching styles or strategies they use. Aelterman et al. (2019) introduces four different teaching styles and eight different teaching approaches presenting them in a circumplex model (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Graphical representation of the circumplex model



Note. From Aelterman et al., 2019, p. 499.

These teaching styles are chaos, control, structure, and autonomy support. In a chaotic teaching style, the teacher lets students do what they want. Chaos can be further divided into abandoning (teacher does not care about the students or offer support) and awaiting (there are no plans,

teachers wait for what students do, if anything) teaching approaches. In a controlling teaching style, the tone is pressuring and considers only the teacher's point of view. Control is divided into demanding (high discipline, commands, and threats) and domineering (power over students, using guilt and shame) teaching approaches. In a teaching style characterized by structure, the tone is guiding involving a lot of assistance given to the students. Structure is separated into guiding (offering clear steps on how to carry out a task, offering help, reflecting on mistakes) and clarifying (clear goals and expectations, monitoring) teaching approaches. Finally, the goal of an autonomy-supportive teaching style is understanding. Autonomy support can be divided into participative (finding what interests students, providing alternatives) and attuning (looking for ways to make lessons enjoyable, dealing with negative feelings, displaying patience) teaching approaches. The idea of the circumplex model is that no teaching style exists in a vacuum but instead different parts of the model are closely related to other parts. For example, Aelterman et al. (2019) points out that "some aspects of autonomy support are likely to be closely related and complementary to structure (e.g., attuning to students' preferences), whereas other aspects of autonomy support lean closer to chaos (e.g., encouraging participation such that students take the lead in their learning)" (p. 499).

According to the skills and values appreciated today, chaos can be considered to be the worst of the teaching styles. Aelterman et al. (2019) explains that this means letting the students remain confused and not meeting the needs of skill development. Chaos also refers to the lack of discipline. A controlling teaching style, on the other hand, highlights the teacher's agenda and can involve the teacher targeting the students by shouting at them and manipulating them. Aelterman et al. mentions that "previous studies have found teacher control to be especially predictive of amotivation (De Meyer et al., 2014, as cited in Aelterman et al., 2019), oppositional defiance (Jang et al., 2016, as cited in Aelterman et al., 2019), and disengagement (Jang et al., 2016, as cited in Aelterman et al., 2019)" (p. 500). Autonomy support is at the other

end of the spectrum. According to Aelterman et al. autonomy-supportive teachers have an open and empathetic mindset that encourages teacher-student communication and attuning to students' individual needs. However, “whereas autonomy-supportive teaching is especially critical to foster autonomy need satisfaction, structure fosters students' competence” (Skinner et al., 1998, as cited in Aelterman et al., 2019, p.500). Some positive aspects of structure are that it offers clear goals and expectations, guidance, differentiation, and feedback.

As a conclusion, Aelterman et al. (2019) states that “past research has begun to suggest that autonomy support and structure can go hand in hand as exemplified in the obtained positive correlations between both styles” (Jang et al., 2010; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012, as cited in Aelterman et al., 2019, p. 500). In their own research, Aelterman et al. found that “both the attuning and guiding approach yielded the most pronounced positive correlates with external outcomes, presumably because they both maximize children's experienced need satisfaction” (p. 516). Aelterman et al. offers a questionnaire that can be used to identify a teacher's teaching style. I have modified the questionnaire to give an example of the questions (see Appendix C).

Future considerations

I think that many teachers can agree with the great benefits that SDT and autonomy-supportive teaching have to offer. Ryan et al. (2023) suggests that the best way to achieve high-quality schooling is to cherish both students' and teachers' basic psychological needs and to have self-determination theory as the basis for development. “SDT evaluates curricula, teaching strategies, educational leadership styles, and policies based on the extent to which they support or thwart learners' and teachers' full functioning and wellness” (p. 609). In their study, Cheon et al. (2014) found that autonomy support has similar benefits for both teachers and students. After participating in workshops which helped teachers to develop their skills in autonomy support, teachers were reported to be more satisfied with their work, being more

efficient in what they do, displaying passion for their work, and coping better (emotionally and physically) at work. Similar benefits have been reported for students in multiple studies:

“Students who are randomly assigned to receive autonomy support from their teachers, compared to those who are not (students in a control group), experience higher-quality motivation and display markedly more positive classroom functioning and educational outcomes, including more need satisfaction, greater autonomous motivation (i.e., intrinsic motivation, identified regulation), greater classroom engagement, higher-quality learning, a preference for optimal challenge, enhanced psychological and physical well-being, and higher academic achievement.” (Cheon & Reeve, 2013, 2014; Cheon et al., 2012; Cheon et al., 2014; Reeve et al. 2004; Vasteenkiste et al., 2004; Vasteenkiste et al., 2015; Vasteenkiste et al., 2004, as cited in Reeve, 2016, p. 132-133)

In order to offer these benefits for students and teachers, more needs to be done first in disseminating knowledge about the theoretical background of SDT. Secondly, teachers need to be supported in developing their teaching styles and skills through professional development and practical workshops.

Limitations and barriers to autonomy-supportive teaching

Autonomy-supportive teaching relies heavily on understanding and acknowledging the students’ point of view. Giving students so much power in the classroom can be scary for teachers and definitely raises some concerns. Aelterman et al. (2019) points out that there is a general consensus that autonomy-supportive teaching has multiple benefits for students, but, at the same time, teachers are afraid “that too much autonomy-support might undermine structure and lead to demotivating chaos” (p. 498). Perhaps the concern here is that not all students are ready to take the needed responsibility for their own learning. Situations also vary and using autonomy support does not mean the complete abandonment of the other teaching

styles. In fact, Aelterman et al. conclude that “in new or problematic situations children will likely benefit from teachers’ leadership and directiveness” (p. 516). Teachers are often also concerned about time, and especially the lack of time, and feel that discussion with students leave less time for the actual instruction. Reeve et al. (2022) acknowledges that giving direct instructions without talking about explanatory rationales or addressing students’ feelings is a quicker way, but, in the end, investing that time pays off and helps the students find the motivation to do something. Engaging in a discussion with students is, however, not always easy. Being autonomy-supportive and especially addressing problems in the classroom requires strength and a good self-esteem from the teacher, as well as, reflection from the teacher’s part of why students are having negative feelings. The lack of skills and knowledge on how to deal with problems often leads to avoiding or not addressing the problems. This, nevertheless, is not beneficial for the teacher-student relationship.

The most common fear of autonomy support is that students can do whatever they want to, and teachers know that this will lead to the loss of classroom management. This is, however, not the case. According to Aelterman et al. (2019), the same teachers who are concerned with stirring up the intrinsic motivation of their students also help students follow rules and take responsibility. Similarly, some teachers feel that the education system with its curriculum, exams and all kinds of requirements is a hindrance to developing autonomy support (Ryan et al., 2023). It is true that education systems work in a certain way and perhaps it is not possible to change the whole system. However, experienced teachers tend to find ways to deal with the regulations and restrictions of the system. If we remember to keep the focus on the learner, I believe we can be innovative. Dialogue with the students is also important. “While autonomy support is often equated with a sense of choice, it is more accurately recognized as a sense of agreement, endorsement, and alignment with a proposed direction of action” (Ryan & Deci,

2017, as cited in Al-Hoorie et al., 2022, p. 16). Students cannot do this alone. Instead, it must be done negotiating and co-operating with the teacher.

For the goal of becoming an autonomy-supportive teacher, one needs to be willing to change and develop some aspects of their classroom style. However, we cannot think that teachers work in a stable environment. Reeve et al. (2022) claims that if students lack the motivation to learn, this has an effect on the teacher's motivation, too. In fact, they ask an important question "How can you motivate a student who just doesn't want to be there in the first place?" (p. 202). This is a tough question but a situation that many teachers face every day.

Special considerations for language learning

Although autonomy support is a universal strategy that can be adapted to the teaching of any curricular subject, I was especially interested in language teaching and learning because that is the area of my expertise. I was happy to notice that research has been made in that field, too, and positive results on the effect of autonomy support on language development have been found. According to Noels (2023), "To the extent that learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied, they are likely to sustain any intrinsic motivation they might have and/or adopt a more internalized orientation toward learning and using the new language" (p. 623). Autonomy seems to be the key here because "some research shows that greater autonomy is associated with a greater willingness to communicate, more frequent and higher-quality contact, and heightened identity with the target-language group" (Noels, 2005; Goldberg & Noels, 2006; Comanaru & Noels, 2009, as cited in Noels, 2023, p. 627). Al-Hoorie et al. (2022) explains the importance of the three basic psychological needs by saying that students have to believe that learning the language is meaningful for them (autonomy), they are able to do it (competence), and they are supported in the process (relatedness). McEown and Oga-Baldwin (2019) also write about self-determination and formal language

education. They highlight the quality of motivation and the importance of using the language independently not relying on the teacher all the time.

“Even in formal, compulsory language learning situations, teachers employing the principles and practices of self-determination theory can have more positive effects on motivation, well-being, and language achievement. Nurturing environments matter in learning a language, and self-determination theory can improve teachers’ instruction, peers’ support, and individuals’ well-being when engaged in language education.” (p. 9)

Application and implementation as a Fulbright teacher

As I mentioned in the introduction, I work as a language teacher at middle school level in Finland. I have noticed that some students are not motivated to learn, do not want to take the ownership of their schoolwork, and have lost the joy of learning. After studying SDT and, more specifically, autonomy-supportive teaching, I strongly believe that by supporting students’ basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, teachers can help students maintain and enhance their intrinsic motivation, engagement, and overall well-being at school. The seven autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors are a great toolkit for any teacher who wants to adopt an autonomy-supportive teaching style.

Many teachers in Finland are not familiar with SDT. They might use some of the instructional behaviors in their teaching, but a better understanding of the framework is needed. I am definitely going to use the tools I have learned while writing this paper with my students. To help me implement autonomy-supportive approach in my own teaching, I have created a structure lesson plan (Appendix A) and a lesson plan template (Appendix B). These will help me to plan learning activities with the seven instructional behaviors in mind. I will bring this framework home with me to share it with my colleagues and, hopefully, also with my fellow

Fulbright teachers all over the world. While working on the paper, I have gathered material that will be the basis of a professional development workshop. I will format a workshop for teachers to share what I have learned during the Fulbright program, and to help them on their path of becoming autonomy-supportive teachers.



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Appendices

Appendix A

AN AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE LESSON What to take into consideration?

1. Pre-lesson reflection: preparing and planning

- take the students' perspective
- consider the issue of choice

Questions to ask from yourself:

Will students get satisfaction for their basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness?

Will students think that the lesson is intriguing, challenging enough, and of personal value to them?

How could you make the lesson even more appealing to the students?

2. Lesson begins: introducing tasks

- introduce the agenda for the lesson
- vitalize inner motivational resources or provide explanatory rationales
- introduce a standard of excellence or a goal to strive for
- ask perspective-taking questions
- listen and respond to students' input
- acknowledge negative feelings associated with high standards
- engage students in the tasks

Questions to ask from the students:

What kind of goals do you have for today?

What are you most interested/excited about today's lesson?

This is what I had in mind for today. What do you think?

Is there anything in the lesson you would like to change?

How does the topic relate to your life?

Why do you think we need to study this topic?

3. In-lesson:

- **addressing and solving problems**
 - acknowledge and accept negative affect
 - rely on informational, non-pressuring language
 - display patience
- **offer support**
 - offer step-by-step guidance and mentoring (e.g. modeling, coaching, scaffolding, offering hints, suggesting strategies, providing sources, providing examples, providing 'how to' instructions)
 - be responsive to students' initiatives
 - display patience and understanding



- **feedback on the tasks or overall progress**

- ask perspective taking questions
- be empathic
- offer solutions to correct the problem
- be clear about objectives
- offer tips on how to improve future performances
- concentrate on describing what is happening, no comments on the student as a person
- use a considerate tone of voice
- provide a rationale to explain why making progress is important

Questions to ask from the students:

I can see that you are not enthusiastic about today's lesson. Do I have that right?

What might we do differently this time? Any suggestions?

Would you like to learn about this in a different way? What sounds good?

Do you think you can do this? Are you stuck anywhere?

Do you think that was a good performance?

What do you think you did well, and what did you do poorly?

Yes, progress is slow, isn't it? Why is it important that we do this?

4. Right before the lesson ends

- ask the students to fill in an exit cards asking for their feedback about the lesson

5. Homework

- communicate what it involves to competently do the homework
- offer a number of different homework exercises (e.g. three) and ask students to pick a few of them (e.g. two)
- encourage students to work together with someone on their homework

6. Teacher's reflection after the class

- consider if the learning objectives were met
- define if you were able to satisfy students' needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy
- take the students' feedback into account and adjust teaching accordingly

Note. Adapted from Reeve, 2016; Reeve et al., 2022

Appendix B

AN AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE LESSON

A lesson plan template

Lesson:										
Learning objective:										
Lesson structure:	Description of the activity:			Autonomy-supportive elements: (tick the boxes)						Teacher reflections after the lesson:
	autonomy	competence	relatedness	students' perspective	students' personal interests	presenting activities in need-satisfying ways	explanatory rationales	negative feelings: acknowledge and accept	using invitational language	displaying patience
Activity 1:										
Activity 2:										
Activity 3:										

Appendix C

SITUATIONS IN SCHOOL

A questionnaire for teachers

“The Situations in School questionnaire lists 15 different teaching situations that commonly occur during classroom instruction. For each situation, four ways a teacher might handle that situation are presented. There are no right or wrong answers. Instead, you are asked to indicate how much each way of handling the situation does or does not describe what you have done in the past – in similar situations” (from the supplemental material of Aelterman et al., 2019).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Does not describe me at all			Somewhat describes me			Describes me extremely well

Some examples of the questions in the questionnaire:

Classroom rules

You are thinking about classroom rules. So, you:

Structure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Make an announcement about your expectations and standards for being a cooperative classmate.
Chaos	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't worry too much about the rules and regulations.
Control	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Post your rules. Tell students they have to follow all the rules. Post the sanctions for disobeying the rules.
Autonomy support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Invite students to suggest a set of guidelines that will help them to feel comfortable in class.

Lesson plan

As you prepare for class, you create a lesson plan. Your top priority would be to:

Structure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Communicate which learning goals you expect students to accomplish by the end of the lesson.
Chaos	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't plan or organize too much. The lesson will unfold itself.
Autonomy support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Offer a very interesting, highly engaging lesson.
Control	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Insist that students have to finish all their required work – no exceptions, no excuses.

Motivating students

You would like to motivate students during class. You decide to:

Chaos	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Minimize the lesson plan; let what happens happen in the lesson.
Control	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Pound the desk and say loudly: Now it is time to pay attention!
Structure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Offer help and guidance.
Autonomy support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Identify what the personal benefits of the learning material are for students' everyday life.

Students complain

At a difficult point in the lesson, students begin to complain. In response, you:

Autonomy support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Accept their negative feelings as okay. Assure them that you are open to their input and suggestions.
Control	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Insist they pay attention. They must learn this material for their own good.
Structure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Show and teach them a helpful strategy for how to break down the problem to solve it step-by-step.
Chaos	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Just ignore the whining and complaining. They need to learn to get over the obstacles themselves.

Student misbehavior

A couple of students have been rude and disruptive. To copy, you:

Control	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Command that they get back on task immediately; otherwise there will be bad consequences.
Autonomy support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Explain the reason why you want them to behave properly. Later talk to them individually; you listen carefully to how they see things.
Structure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Communicate the classroom expectations for cooperation and prosocial skill.
Chaos	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Let it go because it is too much of a pain to intervene.

Note. Adapted from the supplemental material of Aelterman et al., 2019.