Self-Determination Theory (SDT) & Strengths-Based Approaches from a Positive Psychology (PP) Perspective

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Opening Activity

1. Think of an individual student whom you either currently are working with or have worked with in the past. Finish the sentence:

a) I know [name] is **smart because**…

Opening Activity

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a) I know [name] is **smart because**…

b) If [name] is so smart, **why can't he/she**…

Outline

- Summary of **SDT**
  - Approaches, benefits, & how it applies to at-risk youth
    - A discussion of our research
- Summary of **PP strengths-based approaches**
  - Practices & benefits; & how they apply to at-risk youth
    - A description of my dissertation research

- *SDT grounds our work: *Promoting Positive Life Outcomes...* & the two literatures ground my dissertation work.

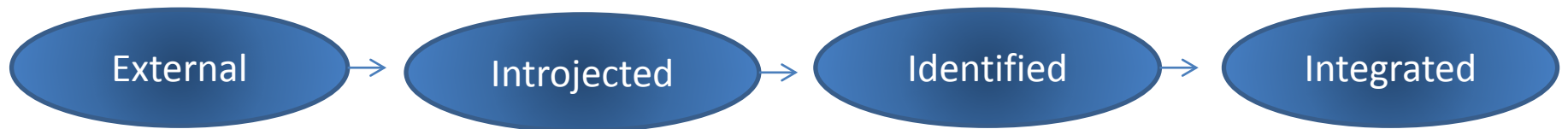# Self-Determination Theory (SDT)
Description

- **Social-cognitive** theory of motivation
- Motivation: "*the hypothetical construct used to describe the internal and/or external forces that produce the initiation, direction, intensity, and persistence of behaviour*" (Vallerand & Thrill, 1993, p. 18)
- Evolved from study of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation…

SDT's Continuum of Motivation

- Process of **internalization**:

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Externally Regulated  →  Internally Regulated
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- SDT's **Continuum of Motivation**:

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External  →  Introjected  →  Identified  →  Integrated
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(Gagne et al., 2010)

SDT's Basic Psychological Needs

- People have inherent growth tendencies to exert effort, agency, & commitment in their lives.
- These help people to meet their **three basic psychological needs** of:

Autonomy (A)

Belonging (B)

Competence (C)
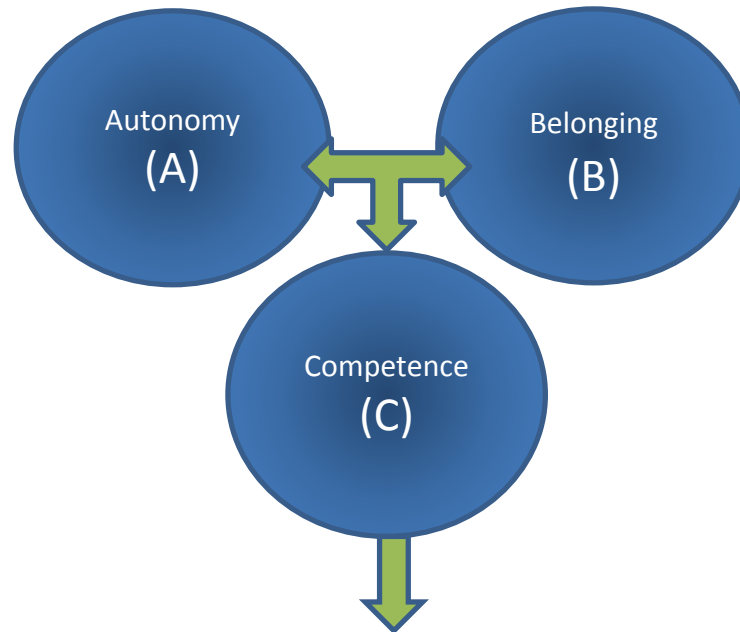
*positive outcomes associated with need satisfaction

Applied to Education …

- **Three categories** of teacher behaviours that support student SD:

    1. Autonomy-support

    2. Structure

    3. Involvement

(Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Reeve & Jang, 2006;

Skinner & Belmont, 1993)

Autonomy-Support

1. **Autonomy-Support**: Allowing internal states to direct behaviour. Recognizing & fostering student needs, interests, & preferences. Four categories of ***autonomy-supportive*** teacher behaviours (Reeve, 2006):

1	Nurturing inner motivational resources
2	Relying on informational & un-controlling language
3	Communicating value & providing rationales
4	Acknowledging & accepting student expressions of negative affect

Autonomy-Supportive Behaviours

- Nine **specific behaviours** that are **autonomy-supports**:

1	Listening carefully
2	Allowing students to work in their own way
3	Allowing students to talk
4	Carefully arranging learning materials & seating
5	Encouraging effort & persistence
6	Praising improvement & skill
7	Offering progress-enabling hints
8	Acknowledging student questions & comments
9	Clearly acknowledging student perspectives

Structure

2. **Structure**: Giving students a sufficient amount & quality of information.

- Some behaviours are **autonomy-supportive** & provide **structure**:
  - telling students what is expected of them, while also being flexible;
  - offering progress-enabling hints;
  - praising signs of improvement; giving students opportunity to talk;
  - acknowledging student perspectives & experiences.

- Another teacher behaviour, shown to increase student **self-efficacy**: Giving students the opportunity to practice and be successful at a task (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).

Involvement

3. **Involvement**: Taking time for; expressing warmth toward; being attuned to; & providing resources for students.

- It is argued that **all three needs** can only be met in the context of close/caring community.

- Program designed to enhance pro-social development in students (Battistich et al., 1997):

  - Collaborating with others
  - Providing & receiving meaningful help
  - Discussing & reflecting upon others' experiences
  - Developing important social competencies

Promoting Positive Life Outcomes for Children and Youth who Struggle in School

Overview

- How are the **academic**, **social**, & **emotional** needs of at-risk youth met within various educational programs?

- **Case study analysis.**

- Developed and refined in one alternative education program.

One Context

- An **alternative school** in a large urban school district.

- Students are youth (15 to 19 years) who are on **probation** or in the care of a **social worker.**

- Have a history of academic difficulties, which makes them **vulnerable to number negative outcomes** including school disengagement & drop-out.

- Many misuse drugs and alcohol, have few positive role models, & many barriers to employment.

Two Parts of Case Study

(1) **Observations**	Looked at whether and how students were given the opportunity to experience autonomy, belonging, & competence in activities in their alternative education program.
(2) **Photo-Elicitation (PE) Technique**	Asked students to take photos that represented their experiences of autonomy, belonging, & competence during classroom activities, & later, to discuss these photos with us.

Observations: What We've Discovered …

1. Teacher engaged in practices in line with what the **SDT** literature outlines.

2. These practices were embedded in activities designed for the specific students.

   – Activities were not primarily academic (e.g., *Cross Fit, Garden Works, Cooking*)

3. A new category emerged: ***Rapport***

Example Activity: *CrossFit*

Attribute	Specific Behaviours
Student Influence	1. Students are given the opportunity to talk. 2. Student perceptions are acknowledged. 3. Students have a part in the decision-making process.
Structure	1. The teacher is clear about his or her expectations of the class. 2. The teacher's expectations are flexible, depending on student ability. 3. A rationale is provided for the activity.

Example Activity: *CrossFit*

Attribute	Specific Behaviours
Group Cohesion	1. The teacher fosters active participation in the group. 2. The students are encouraged to share purpose/goals. 3. Cooperation (e.g., helping each other) is encouraged.
Involvement	1. The teacher asks non-academic questions. 2. The teacher provides information, individually, to the students. 3. The teacher gives emotional support to the students.

Benefits of SDT Approaches *(autonomy & belonging)*

- Benefits of **autonomy-supportive** classrooms:
  - ⬆ positive emotionality, academic performance, & academic persistence with a ⬇ likelihood of dropping out.
  - Pertinent to at-risk youth (for example, students with LD report lower levels of autonomy).
- Benefits of **belonging** need satisfaction:
  - ⬆ self-esteem, empathy, social competence, conflict resolution skills, achievement; & ⬇ depression & anxiety.
  - Researchers contend that belonging need satisfaction is most important for at-risk students such as those with a history of academic difficulties (Deci et al., 1991).

Benefits of SDT Approaches *(competence)*

- Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis (1996) contend that "psychological health depends on ongoing feelings of effectance or **competence**" & that "the need to feel competence is a basic organismic propensity that underlies self-esteem and self confidence" (p. 1271).
  - Associated with ⬆ well-being.
    - Students with LD & emotional problems report lower levels of academic competence.

Benefits of SDT Approaches
(intrinsic motivation & engagement)

- It has been argued that when students' psychological needs are met, their SD ⬆, which promotes the internalization of external motivations such that students become more **intrinsically motivated**.
  - Many benefits: including taking on challenges, utilizing skills, & an adaptive pattern of psycho-social functioning.
  - Youth who are delinquent have generalized external motivations; & students with LD have more external than internal attributions.
- **Engagement** also ⬆ when students' psychological needs are met.
  - Associated with ⬆ positive emotions, personal adjustment to school, & school achievement.
  - Low school achievement is associated with conduct disorder, delinquency, & antisocial behaviour.

Photo-Elicitation: What Students Said …

Skateboard

Autonomy

"It's a picture of [my own] design of a skateboard and it features my own logo;" "Art is a kind of expression… it expresses me".

Goal-Setting & **Follow-Through**

"That's what the logo actually looked like on the computer, so I did my best to copy every little detail;" "So I took the challenge and that turned out really well".

Photo-Elicitation: What Students Said …

Wall Ball
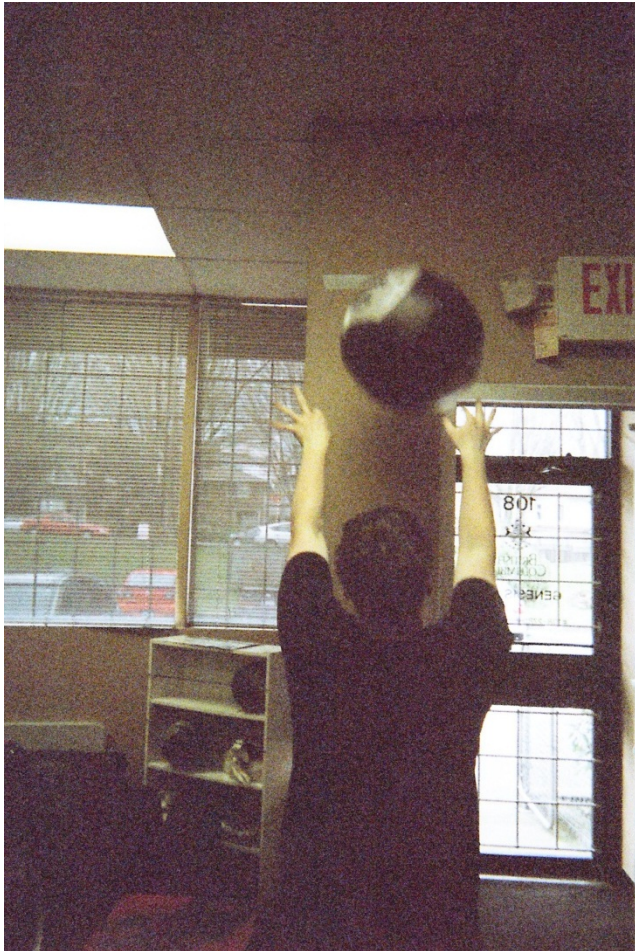
Competence

"Getting stronger… whenever I do this. And its especially helping in hockey… I figured out how to skate backwards and to do a transition over from skating forward to skating backwards".

Goal-Setting

"So those were the key components that I needed to learn through hockey because you need to sometimes be on offence and defence".

Summary

Having needs of autonomy, belonging, & competence met was associated with:

- **Classroom Engagement-** "I felt great after doing it"; "I came back to school... pumped for a new year".

- **Psychological Well-Being-** "I'm definitely pushing myself and it's helping"; "[I've been] misjudging what I can actually do".

- **Self-Regulated Learning-** "If I would fall, I would learn from that and try something else. But I figured it out bang on".
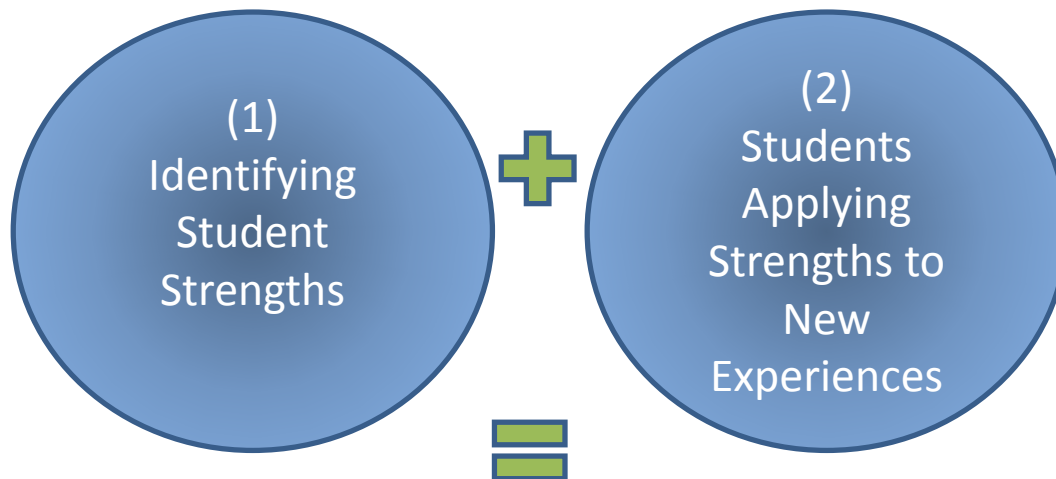
MyPlanner for Youth

- A tool to help youth track their **goal-setting** & **follow-through** (& engage in SRL):

http://myplanner.research.educ.ubc.ca/login/index.php

Positive Psychology (PP)

- Sought to remedy negative biases in psychology by focusing on what works well for people as a way of **(a)** providing a full account of human nature and behaviour; & **(b)** increasing fulfilment and improving quality of life.

- As **applied to education**:

(1)
Identifying
Student
Strengths

+

(2)
Students
Applying
Strengths to
New
Experiences

=

*positive outcomes associated with highlighting & fostering strengths

PP Strengths

- Usually refer to **character strengths** & correspond to measures such as the **Big Five**.

- Some have taken exception to this view of strengths:

  - Ignores role of experience in developing strengths & talents.

- Another way to identify strengths: what children are **good at** & what they **like doing**.

Approach to Highlighting & Fostering Student Strengths

- Disparity in approaches taken by schools.
  - Lopez and Louis (2009) identify 5 modern-days principles:

1	*Measurement* of student strengths
2	Personalizing students' learning process through *individualization*
3	Students *networking* with others
4	*Deliberate application* of personal strengths
5	*Intentional development* of strengths

Highlighting Strengths
(from positive psychotherapy)

- **Participants:**

1. Completed the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VAI-IS);

2. Completed a detailed narrative of what they're good at; &

3. In collaboration with therapist, devised ways to use strengths in work, love, friendship, leisure.

(Seligman et al., 2006)

Benefits of PP Strengths Approach

- Benefits associated with **(1)** highlighting strengths; **(2)** positive affect; **(3)** using personal strengths.

1. **Identifying strengths** leads to: ⬆classroom engagement, academic expectations, self-esteem, self-efficacy, & positive affect.

   – Important to at-risk youth who experience disproportionate rates of school disengagement, drop-out, self-critical cognitive schemas, & affective disorders.

Benefits of PP Strengths Approach

2. **Positive affect** leads to: ⬆creativity; encourages careful, systematic processing, helping to make decision-making more thorough and efficient; and facilitates approach behaviour.

3. **Drawing on strengths** leads to:⬇depressive symptoms; and ⬆motivation to accomplish goals & ability to garner social support.

   – At-risk youth have an increased likelihood of experiencing bullying & social withdrawal.

My Dissertation Research

- Another aspect of our **case studies**.

- **Narrative interviews** with former students of AEPs to learn: (**a**) about their current circumstances; & (**b**) whether and how they perceive time spent in an AEP has contributed to their life outcomes.

- At-risk youths' vulnerabilities persist in adulthood.

- Adds to our research by discovering: whether the variables we've been watching influence students' choices & circumstances beyond the AEP.

Theoretical Framework
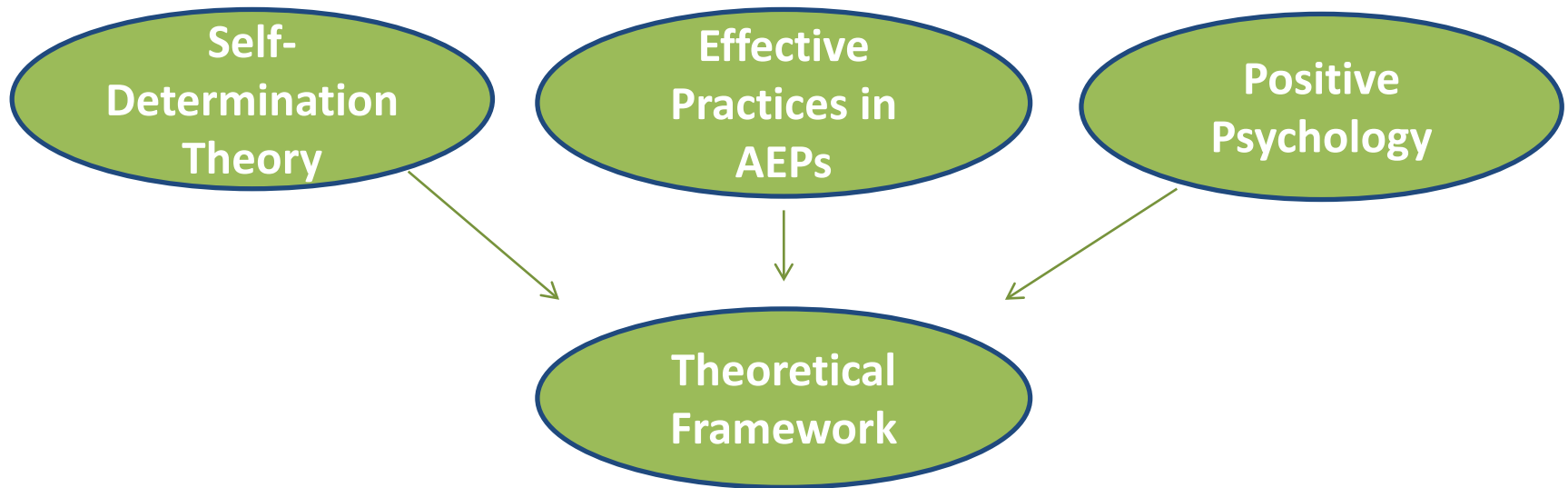
- **SDT** & **PP strengths-based approaches** have a focus on students' emotional & social needs.
- Why PP strengths-based literature?

Categories of Classroom Features
(*for my dissertation research)

- Based on research on **alternative education programs**, & from a **SDT** & **PP strengths-based** perspective.

- **Three categories:**

- 1. relationships

- 2. student well-being

- 3. student learning

1. Relationships

A	Trustworthy & positive **teacher/student** relationships
B	**Mentors** who role-model positive relationships for students
C	Students part of a close, caring **community** with shared goals
D	Interagency collaboration in the AEP & a shared vision among **stakeholders**

2. Student Well-Being

A	Fostering student **psychological well-being**; resiliency & self-understanding
B	A supportive & non-judgemental **learning environment**
C	The use of **positive reinforcement** for appropriate, versus punishment for inappropriate behaviour

2. Student Learning

A	Giving students a **sufficient amount & quality of information** about expectations and consequences
B	**Individualizing remediation** to students' unique needs
C	Encouraging students to take **ownership of their learning**
D	Teachers having **pedagogical competence** in a wide range of subject areas

Closing Activity

1. Can you think of how **SDT** & **PP strengths-based approaches** could help meet the **unique needs of your students**, i.e., are there specific practices you could see being especially pertinent/beneficial (discuss in pairs)...

Closing Activity

1. Drawing on the information I presented on PP strengths-based approaches, **now**, finish these two sentences:

a) I know [name] is **smart because**…

b) To cope in areas I identified as problematic, he/she could **use a strength** in the following way:

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