The Role of Structure in Autonomy Supportive Classrooms

Teacher-provided autonomy support and structure both make important contributions to supporting students’ classroom engagement. The nature of their relation with each other, however, has been portrayed rather confusingly in the literature in at least three different ways—as being antagonistic [opposite, mutually exclusive concepts (Daniels & Bizar, 1998)], curvilinear [some structure is good; too much will intrude on students’ learning (deCharms, 1984)], and independent [two independent aspects of teachers’ instructional styles, each of which can contribute support to students’ motivation and engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Belmont, 1993)].

The confusion stems from the wrong understanding of structure as control. For example, to provide structure when it is not needed, to be continually reiterating instructions and guidelines that are already understood, is not to be high in structure but is, instead, to be controlling and intrusive. Although structure and control have often been confused, but Jang, Reeve & Deci (2010) suggest that, although they are separate concepts, the optimal learning environment for classroom engagement involves structure provided in an autonomy supportive way. Student engagement would be highest when teachers provide high levels of both autonomy support and structure.

1. Teachers seeking engagement-fostering instructional strategies need not choose between providing autonomy support or structure but, instead, can focus their instructional energies on providing autonomy support and structure.

2. For the provision of autonomy support, we suggest that teachers might want to initiate learning activities by involving students’ inner motivational resources, communicating in non-controlling and informational ways and acknowledging students’ perspectives and negative feelings when motivational (e.g., listlessness) and behavioral (e.g., disrespectful language) problems arise.

3. For the provision of structure, we suggest that teachers might want to initiate learning activities by offering clear and detailed expectations and instructions, offering helpful guidance and scaffolding as students try to profit from the lesson, and providing feedback to enhance perceptions of competence and perceived personal control during a reflective post-performance period.
**Key Definitions**

**Autonomy-supportive style:** Autonomy-supportive teachers facilitate students’ personal autonomy by taking the students’ perspective; identifying and nurturing the students’ needs, interests, and preferences; providing optimal challenges; highlighting meaningful learning goals; and presenting interesting, relevant, and enriched activities (Jang, Reeve & Deci, 2010)

**Engagement:** Engagement expresses the behavioral intensity and emotional quality of a student’s active involvement during a learning activity (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008)

**Structure:** Refers to the amount and clarity of information that teachers provide to students about expectations and ways of effectively achieving desired educational outcomes (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Its opposite is chaos in which teachers are confusing or contradictory, fail to communicate clear expectations and directions, and ask for outcomes without articulating the means to attain them.

**References**


