

Why are some  
children more  
successful as  
learners than others



Before considering how children learn in a variety of ways it is important to establish how successful learning is defined for the context of this essay.

Rigby et al (1992) broadly construed that learning refers to a life-long process in which organisms make contact with and assimilate their environment. However, it is important to relate specific types of learning to the theories of motivation, as the effects of motivation will impact differently on different types of learners. This dependent variable (learning) is directly influenced by the independent variables (type of motivation), so it is important to acknowledge the significance of learning within literature. Deci et al (1991) acknowledged that the central features of optimal learning are conceptual understanding and the flexible use of knowledge. Deci et al (1991) summarised this theory by stipulating, the learning outcomes stressed are understood both in the relations among facts and the ways to find or generate facts. My interpretation of this theory is that it allows the learner to have an understanding of the outcome and processes that were used to find that outcome. Deci et al (1991) believe the strength of this theory lies in the recognition that the acquisition and retention of facts are not enough to promote successful learning.

Another factor to consider, for the context of the essay, is that children learn in a variety of different ways. The deep learning approach describes active engagement with the content, leading to extensive elaboration of the learning material, whilst seeking personal understanding. In contrast, the surface approach indicates the use of routine memorisation to reproduce aspects of the subject matter expected to be assessed (Entwistle, 2001).

There is a general acceptance that the manner in which individuals choose

or are inclined to approach a learning situation has an impact on performance and achievement of learning outcomes (Cassidy, 2004). My interpretation of Cassidy's research is that one learning style will not be more successful than another, but, consequently, it is imperative for teachers to approach a learning style that suits the individuals in that class in order to engage them in the process of learning. Learning needs to be personalised for all children so they can achieve their educational potential. If personalised learning is not accomplished, not every child in the class would achieve the same success in their learning.

It is also important to recognise the effect that the learning environment has on the success of children and how this can be manipulated to create a positive experience for them. Reeve (2006) recognised that students can be curious, proactive and highly engaged or they can be alienated, reactive and passive. Just how engaged students are depends on the quality of classroom conditions. In school settings, engagement is important because it functions as a behavioural pathway by which students' motivational processes contribute to their subsequent learning and development (Reeve et al, 1991). Therefore, it is important that an effective learning environment is created to enhance children's motivation and, in turn, increase their learning success. However, opposing this, Taylor, Ntoumanis and Smith (2009) recognise the peripheral position of P. E. means that P. E. teachers work in very different occupational environments in comparison to teachers in "core" subjects. It is important to manipulate the environment to suit the subject being taught therefore enhancing learning. I believe the majority of

children respond positively to the P. E. environment, as it is a different setting to the classroom.

As a direct influence of my experience as a student and a teacher I, believe that a positive correlation needs to be created between the learning environment and the learning style of the students so that successful learning can be created. I also believe this makes a teacher's job particularly difficult nowadays because there are so many independent variables that need to be considered so that learners can achieve their maximum learning potential. Hardre et al (2006) recognised that the interaction of teaching and learning results from complex dynamics of multiple structures and characteristics. This places particular emphasis on the teacher's motivation to understand these characteristics. Teacher's motivation appears crucial for optimal human functioning in the work place because teachers who are highly motivated are more engaged in their work and more satisfied (Fernet et al, 2008). Furthermore, Fernet et al (2008) state that a teachers' motivation is directly linked to their students' motivation. The overall aim of this essay is to reflect on the importance of motivation in relation to Self-Determination Theory (SDT). It is important to declare that other theories of motivation are signified for educational settings, but this theory will be used to make links between types of motivation and successful learners.

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) distinguishes between different types of motivation based on the different reasons or goals that give rise to an action. A person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is characterised as unmotivated, whereas someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan & Deci (2000) declare that the most

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basic distinction is between intrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and extrinsic motivation, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT, when applied to the realm of education, is concerned primarily with promoting in students an interest in learning, the value of education, a confidence in their capacities and attributes (Deci et al 1991). SDT is one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks to study motivation in P. E, which is not surprising given that its major propositions and constructs are highly relevant to P. E. (Ntoumanis and Standage, 2009). To conclude, previous research in this area is imperative to determine which method of motivation creates the most successful learner.

SDT assumes that inherent in human nature is the propensity to be curious about one's environment and to be interested in learning and developing one's knowledge (Niemi & Ryan, 2009). Even though this theory can be applied to an educational setting, can it be assumed that students would still go to school if they have a choice of attending? Would children be curious about this type of environment and the processes that occur there if they didn't have an obligation to attend school? Deci, Ryan and Williams (1996) recognise that for an action to be considered fully self-regulated, people must experience a sense of volition and a sense of unpressured willingness to engage in the action. However, by law, all children of compulsory school age, between 5 and 16, must receive a proper full-time education. Parents are responsible for making this happen, either by registering the child at school or by making other arrangements which provide an effective education (Department for Education, 2010). After taking into consideration

the legal requirements (external factor) that ensure children attend school, it is important to discuss whether they exhibit intrinsic or extrinsic motivation within school.

## **Intrinsic Motivation**

Intrinsic motivation can be classed as behaviour which is accepted in the absence of external impetus and that is inherently interesting and enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Vansteenkiste, Soenens & Lens (2009) suggests it is important to apply realistic and meaningful intrinsic goals to the learning activity so that children accept the promoted goal. This theory has been supported by Katz & Assor (2006) who state that options should be constructed that are relevant to children's interests, aimed at their level of ability and are congruent with their values. It is important to recognise what effect this has on the success of learning and Gronlick & Ryan (1987) found that elementary school children, who reported more autonomous motivation for doing schoolwork, in general, showed greater conceptual learning and better memory than children who reported less autonomous motivation. This is an important factor as conceptual learning is directly related to the definition of success learning used in this essay. I would argue that it is difficult to achieve this throughout the curriculum as the learning is always facilitated towards assessment. Several studies have supported this by demonstrating that under certain conditions extrinsic rewards can enhance intrinsic motivation (Ryan, Mims & Koestner, 1983). I don't believe that all students would be able to disengage from the fact that they are always being assessed, whether it is formative or summative methods, and perform based on intrinsic feelings alone. In conjunction with this, I don't believe it is

physically possible for teachers to facilitate a learning environment that will enable all students to be working towards their maximum learning potential as there are too many learning variables to manipulate at one time.

## **Extrinsic Motivation**

It is important to recognise that intrinsic motivation, as discussed above, is not the only form of motivation which students can demonstrate in an educational setting. Pupils can also be motivated by extrinsic factors which lead to a separate outcome. Deci & Ryan (2010) recognised that extrinsic motivation is used to motivate students on tasks and lessons that are important but not necessarily intrinsically interesting. Niemiec & Ryan (2009) suggest that all too often educators introduce external controls into the learning climate, which can undermine the relationship between teachers and students and also stifle the natural process involved in high quality learning. However, I think it is impossible to achieve the natural process of learning consistently and this method of motivation can be used regularly and effectively, to enhance learning in the long term. When pupils are unmotivated, extrinsic motivation can be used to ensure that they are engaging in the teaching and learning process. Fortier, Vallerand and Guay (1995) support this argument by stating that extrinsic motivation can be used as a means to an end, therefore, if autonomy is not present then it be used as a method of increasing successful learning.

## **Types of Extrinsic Motivation**

In SDT, an analysis of extrinsic motivation revolves around the developmental process of internalization (Rigby et al. 1992). Internalization is the process of taking in a value or a regulation and it describes how <https://assignbuster.com/why-are-some-children-more-successful-as-learners-than-others/>

motivation for behaviour can range from amotivation, to passive compliance, to active personal commitment (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is through the process of internalization that extrinsic motivation enables self-determined engagement during important but uninteresting endeavours (Deci & Ryan, 2010). Therefore, it is vital to recognise its importance in an educational setting and its effect on the success of learning, as there are many activities in school which students find boring or uninteresting. It is important to recognise that SDT lists three types of extrinsic motivation and each type of motivation varies in how self-determined and internalized it is (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

## **External Regulation**

Deci & Ryan (1991) recognise that in the real world of the classroom extrinsic motivation is an important method of engaging students on tasks and lessons. External regulation motivation arises from and is dependent on the presence of environmental events such as rewards, pressures and constraints (Deci & Ryan, 2010). External regulation is focused on the outcome of tasks such as assessment and grades in an educational setting. This method is not self-determined and lies on one end of the self-determination continuum. I would argue that this method of motivation is used throughout the school curriculum as children are continually assessed through formative and summative methods. When applied to core P. E. it is important to realise that students are still graded on their ability and knowledge at the end of a unit of work. However, it is important not to use this method of motivation all of the time or it will lose its value. SDT explains that autonomously supported students thrive, and it explains why students



thrive when the teacher supports their autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2010). I think that there needs to be a balance between the two dichotomies and external regulation should be used during more arduous tasks and when the children are amotivated. Therefore, a more autonomous approach should be used during tasks and lessons that are more likely to engage the students. Finding a balance between these two dichotomies and utilising them efficiently would help to increase students' learning success.

## **Introjected Regulation**

Deci & Ryan (2010) suggest that the internalized demands of a teacher or parent actually regulate the student's behaviour, which leads to the reasoning behind introjected regulation (representing the first phase of the internalization process). When parents are controlling they value obedience and conformity in their children (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). I believe this type of motivation is what is needed for some students because they are able to engage more in lessons if they are supervised closely and behave to an ideal standard. I have found this method to be successful with more troublesome children as it acts as a deterrent for misbehaviour and they seek positive feedback from their parents. On the other hand, there is some evidence that, in some instances, high levels of controlling involvement may actually be less beneficial than lower levels of involvement (Weiss & Grolnick, 1991). Thus well-meaning parents may become easily focused on exam results, pressurising their children and undermining the very characteristics they wish to inculcate (Deci & Ryan, 2010). To conclude, introjected regulation motivation is implemented into school and P. E. in particular. There is regular contact between parents and teachers through phone calls, planners and

reports. I would argue that this method of motivation works well for some students and less so for others. It is very much dependent on the individual as to whether this method is successful.

## **Identified Regulation**

Identified regulation is where the student accepts the merits of a belief or behaviour because he or she sees its importance or personal utility (Deci & Ryan, 2010). Identified regulation is the most self-determined of the extrinsic approaches and students use this method as they accept the merits of a belief. (Deci & Ryan, 2010). This theory has been supported by Dweck & Elliott (1983) as they state that children who hold learning goals are concerned with increasing their competence, so their goal is to acquire new skills or extend their mastery. I have observed teachers who use this method to promote reasoning behind certain tasks when students don't envisage it as valuable to their needs. Once the reasoning behind the work has been given the students accept that the work is of value to their learning. On the other hand, I don't believe this method can be used all the time, as some students do not see education as a valuable necessity within their life. There are some students who already have a job guaranteed for them before leaving school so an education is not of any value to them. In this instance, learning is not successful as the students are unmotivated to participate in the lesson. This leads on to how teachers use these different methods to motivate students.

## **Intrinsic Teacher**

Classroom practices that support students' satisfaction of autonomy,

competence and relatedness are associated with greater intrinsic motivation  
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(Niemi & Ryan, 2009). This theory is embraced by other researchers who recognise that a teaching style which provides students with opportunities to make choices appears to have a positive effect on their intrinsic motivation (Biddle et al, 1995). Williams and Deci (1997) concluded that autonomy supportive educators improve conceptual learning and psychological adjustment in medical students. It also links into the definition of successful learning which is being used for the context of this essay. This review, however, was only done on a small scale and, therefore, does not indicate whether this method of teaching is the most effective for a wide range of students. Furthermore, a lot of the research was conducted in a laboratory, which doesn't necessarily reflect real life experiences in education. On the other hand, it could be argued that in a more realistic environment there are too many other factors that need to be taken into consideration when researching the effect of motivation and learning. Ryan & Niemi (2009) summarise this point by clarifying that there is resistance from quantitative methods, reflecting the hegemonic forces entrenched in societies, or that the scientific method ultimately reduces humans to mere objects in causal chains. Therefore, how is it possible to measure the success of learning when it is impossible to isolate motivation as the only factor that influences a child's education?

## **Extrinsic Teacher**

Studies have shown that if teachers feel responsible for student performance standards then they are more controlling towards students and less affective in their teaching (Flink, Boggiano & Barrett, 1990). One reason why teachers use controlling, rather than autonomy-supportive strategies in the classroom

is because external pressures are placed on them (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). With a lot of focus being placed on assessment and targets within school, I feel there has been a shift away from the quality of the teaching occurring. This is supported by Wild, Enzle and Hawkins (1992) who state that an externally constrained teacher imposes lessons on a dependent and constrained learner and, therefore, there are threats to the personal autonomy of both parties. I believe this minimises the enjoyment of the lessons from the students' perspective and because they are not intrinsically motivated an alternate method must be used to increase learning success. Deci et al. (2001) explains that because many of the tasks educators want their students to perform are not inherently interesting or enjoyable, knowing how to promote more active forms of extrinsic motivation becomes an essential strategy for successful teaching.

## **Intrinsic P. E**

Enhancing students' motivation is an important objective in physical education for a teacher as it has been linked to exercise participation outside of school and future intentions to exercise (Standage, Duda & Ntoumanis, 2003). Duda & Nicholls (1992) supported this theory by stating that participation in many sports and physical activities can lead to feelings of autonomy and competence and may produce joy, excitement, thrills and other satisfying emotions. It is therefore easy to see why physical activities may be inherently intrinsically motivating. I would argue that the use of this statement is too broad; even though a vast majority of pupils do enjoy physical education, they do not enjoy all of the activities provided by the P. E. curriculum. In my personal experience, specifically from my diagnostic

placement, I found that the vast majority of boys enjoyed participating in football. On the other hand, when activities such as rugby and dance are included on their timetable, they did not demonstrate the same amount of motivation and enthusiasm. Consequently, Ferrer-Caja & Weiss (2000) found it would be appropriate to examine the model of intrinsic motivation among students taking physical education as an elective class to gain insight into motivational attitudes and behaviours in physical education. Again, this would require isolating motivation as the only variable to effect the success of learning.

### **Extrinsic P. E.**

Although most pupils are intrinsically motivated to participate in P. E. lessons, there are many children who are extrinsically motivated or lack motivation to participate (Ntoumanis, 2001). Extrinsic motivation can be used as an effective method of engaging students in a P. E. lesson if they do not feel intrinsically motivated to learn. It is important to take into consideration the activity that the students are participating in. A study by Fredrick & Ryan (1993) determining motivation levels between fitness activity participants (high appearance motivation) and individual sport participants (low appearance motivation), showed that individual sports participants tended to have higher levels of self-determination towards the activity. Deci & Ryan (2010) support this by stating that extrinsic motivation is expected to relate to lower levels of positive affect, less self-reported satisfaction and competence and lower reports of adherence activity. The issues that arise from the study of Fredrick & Ryan (1993) are that the sample group was quite narrow with 376 participants taking part. Also, the

research used an adult cohort, rather than children, so the question has to be asked, would this theory of motivation still apply to an educational setting? From a personal experience as a student, I found that the use of extrinsic rewards only served to motivate me more in lessons. During my teaching practice, I used extrinsic rewards during invasion games lessons and there was a clear increase in the levels of motivation from students. However, I felt that this extra motivation took the focus away from the learning objectives and towards the extrinsic rewards, which had a direct effect on the success of learning in the lesson.

## **Extracurricular clubs**

It is important to discuss the effect of extra-curricular clubs in school and particularly P. E. on the continued success of students. It can be argued that students do not need to attend these clubs, therefore, are they intrinsically motivated if they attend? Although these clubs are not considered compulsory, their importance in relation to the success of learning is vital. Extra-curricular clubs can contribute by consolidating learning of the traditional P. E. curriculum, as well as offering opportunities in untraditional activities. Students who attend these clubs are considered to be autonomous because they have a choice whether they want to be there or not. Deci & Ryan (2010) recognise that autonomy supported students thrive and this can help to benefit students learning. Taking this into account, their research suggests that when students are given a chance to explore their own agenda it helps to increase engagement. I believe that when pupils are engaged in an activity and they find the task enjoyable then the success of their conceptual learning is greater. However, I feel that P. E. is the only extra-

curricular club which is not associated with an end outcome such as grades. In general, children attend P. E. clubs because they enjoy the activity, whereas in English, for instance, they generally attend to complete work.

### **Own Experience of P. E (Student)**

In my own experience, as a student in P. E, I found that I was most engaged in lessons and was learning optimally when the teacher adopted an autonomous approach to the lesson. This coincides with results from research by Niemiec & Ryan (2009) which demonstrated that children assigned to autonomy-supportive teachers, relative to those assigned to controlling teachers, reported increased intrinsic motivation, perceived competence and self-esteem over time. I felt that certain teachers gave me a sense of responsibility for my learning and allowed me to make my own informed choices and decisions. This helped to build a relationship between myself and the teacher that enhanced my learning in lessons, as well as increasing my intrinsic motivation. When extrinsic motivation was used it only served to motivate me even more, but I didn't feel this approach was necessary because my autonomy was already present when participating in P. E. lessons. However, I do feel that extrinsic motivation can be used as an effective method for students who are amotivated towards P. E. when it is used in the correct fashion.

### **Own Experience of P. E (Teacher)**

From a teaching perspective, I found it difficult to increase motivation during my diagnostic teaching placement. A number of children perceived P. E to have little or no benefit to them in and out of school so they often chose not to bring their kit to lessons. I had particular trouble with a group of lower  
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ability year 10 students, with up to ten students forgetting their kit each lesson. These students demonstrated a form of amotivation and they were neither intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. The generic reason the children gave for not participating was because there was no summative outcome (GCSE grade) at the end of their education. I think this highlights whether students are ever intrinsically motivated in school because the focus is always on results and targets. This reason directed me to try and alter the way I introduced the learning tasks to the students. Niemiec & Ryan (2009) support this approach by suggesting the way in which a teacher introduces learning tasks impacts on students' satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence, thereby either allowing intrinsic motivation to flourish and deeper learning to occur or thwarting these processes. The method I used was to promote their autonomy by teaching to suit their desired learning style and allowing them to learn through games, as well as using external regulation by pressurising the students with threats of detentions.

## **What do children want to achieve?**

Throughout this essay links have been made between different types of motivation and the effects they have on the success of learning. Although the success of learning has already been defined for the context of the essay, it is important to discuss what children want to achieve from their learning experience. Are they more concerned about the grade they achieve or about having understanding about key processes and concepts they are taught? Much of the research in the area of motivation recognises that children who demonstrate intrinsic motivation show better conceptual



learning (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Ryan & Deci (2000) recognised that intrinsic motivation results in high quality learning and creativity, but it is especially important to detail the factors and forces that engender versus undermine it. Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), a sub-theory of SDT, states that events which decrease perceived self-determination (i. e., that lead to a more external perceived locus of causality) will undermine intrinsic motivation (Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 2001). This theory is the underlying reason to discuss whether children are focused on grades or understanding.

### **Assessment or understanding?**

At present there is a large focus on schools within the education system to achieve targets, grades and positioning within league tables, rather than focusing on teaching to develop knowledge of key processes and outcomes. With the increased pressure that is placed on teachers and students alike, I feel that this has caused a shift towards teaching to targets method. In turn, this has taken the freedom away from teachers to use their creativity to develop a curriculum to suit the needs of their learners. Ultimately, this has directed the government to develop an initiative for all students to gain 5 A\*-C at GCSE including English and Maths. The overall emphasis of assessment has been integrated into the educational system by the use of summative assessment at the end of each term. Even further down the assessment continuum, it is important for students to know what level they are working at within lessons and what learning outcomes they should be achieving by the end of the lesson. I would argue that assessment is an important aspect of the education system, but is not ideal for illustrating the success of learners. I would also suggest that pupils who make more progress in lessons

are more successful learners than those who achieve a higher level with minimal effort. Although intrinsic motivation is widely accepted as more beneficial for learning in comparison to extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) with the constraints and pressures that are placed on teachers and students, I feel it is impossible to promote this method, therefore affecting the success of learning.

### **Assessment and P. E.**

One subject area that can be viewed differently, in terms of educational outcomes, is P. E. Summative assessment does not take place, unless this subject is chosen as a GCSE option, but otherwise there are not as many external factors that can undermine the feelings of intrinsic motivation. My teaching experiences so far have indicated that there is an emphasis on learning outcomes within lessons, but no external locus that can undermine intrinsic motivation. As discussed earlier, this is why I think it is important to promote intrinsic motivation within P. E. lessons as learners may not get the chance to engage this way in other lessons. I think this allows students to increase their conceptual learning and develop life skills, rather than be taught how to pass an exam. If the students have taken away knowledge and skills which they can use in life then I feel that they have been successful with their learning, in comparison to a student who has been taught to pass an exam. On the other hand, students who do not like participating in this area of the curriculum will find core P. E. surplus to their requirements as they do not have to pursue a grade. Therefore, there is no external locus to undermine any feelings of intrinsic motivation. However, it

is important to motivate these students by other methods to facilitate successful learning.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this essay has critiqued the effect of different types of motivation, in line with the theory of SDT, on successful learning for children in an educational setting. Particular focus has been placed on the effects of motivation that students adopt, the approach to learning from the teachers and the subject being studied, including strong links to Physical Education. As all children learn in different ways, it is impossible to suggest that one isolated method of motivation helps to create more successful students. Furthermore, it can be argued that different types of motivation are required for the same learner, when they are being taught in different activity areas. This makes the teachers' task extremely difficult as different types of motivation need to be utilised to help children reach their educational potential. From a personal perspective, it is important that I am able to utilise different methods of motivation to enhance the success of the students I am responsible for. Deci & Ryan (2010) recognise that integrating students' motivational resources into the school curriculum requires teachers to develop new skills and implement conceptual change. Educational environments contain many independent variables that can contribute to a child's learning and these variables need to be considered when researching the effect of motivation on the success of learning. I don't believe that the research about motivation in an educational setting can be fully endorsed, as it is impossible to isolate motivation as the only factor affecting the success of learning. Finally, I would question whether a child is ever intrinsically

motivated in an educational setting due to legal requirements to attend and the focus on assessment within lessons.

## **Are pupils ever intrinsically motivated? (Assessment)**