Teaching in Ways that Support Students’ Autonomy

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This chapter focuses on what students need from their teachers if they are to engage themselves freely and productively in learning activities and thereby learn, develop skills, and position themselves to become the sort of person they strive to become. For these student outcomes to happen, students need many instructional supports, such as interesting lessons, clear goals, timely scaffolding, feedback about their progress, and so forth. From a motivational perspective, however, what students need most from their teachers is support for their autonomy. Recognizing this, the purpose of the chapter is to offer teachers empirically-validated recommendations on how to support students’ autonomy during instruction.

The theoretical framework that makes these teaching recommendations possible is self-determination theory (SDT). SDT is an approach to student motivation that uses empirical methods to investigate the role that students’ inner motivational resources play in explaining their classroom engagement and effective functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002). Some key inner motivational resources that teachers can assume all students possess are a psychological need for autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and personal preferences that reflect their self-endorsed goals and values. A key observation of the theory is that students are sometimes agentic, engaged, and responsible but are other times passive, listless, and irresponsible, and it is the extent to which the social context energizes and catalyzes (vs. frustrates and undermines) students’ motivation that explains an important part of these different ways of approaching a learning activity. What this means in a practical sense is that teachers can assume that students walk into the classroom possessing reliable and engagement-fostering motivational r-e-
sources to the point that the teacher’s role becomes the offering of instructional opportunities that support and nurture (rather than neglect and thwart) these motivational resources.

Part 1. Theoretical Foundation: Understanding Students’ Motivation and Teachers’ Motivating Styles

Research guided by SDT leads to the conclusion that student functioning is most positive when students experience high autonomy during learning and when teachers support their autonomy during instruction (Reeve, 2006a, 2009). Because this is so, it will be helpful to introduce both of these concepts—student autonomy and a teacher’s motivating style—before offering recommendations on how teachers might support students’ autonomy.

Student Autonomy

Autonomy is the inner endorsement of one’s actions—the sense that one’s actions emanate from oneself and are one’s own (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When autonomous, students’ goals and actions flow out of an internal perceived locus of causality, a sense of volition, and an experience of choice (Reeve, Nix, & Hamm, 2003). An internal locus is the perception that the causal source of one’s motivated action is oneself and that one’s ensuing action is congruent with and regulated by one’s self. Its opposite is an external locus of causality, which is the perception that the causal source of one’s motivated action is some force outside the self, such as an attractive incentive or a pressing deadline. Volition is an experience of feeling free, and it involves an unpressured willingness to engage in an activity. Its opposite is a sense of pressure in which one “has to” do something (e.g., “Though I don’t really want to, I have to study tonight.”). Perceived choice over one’s actions reflects an ongoing decision-making flexibility to choose what to do, how to do it, whether or not to change one’s course of action, or to stop altogether and do something else. Its opposite is a sense of obligation or inflexible assignment. The psychological construct that integrates these three subjective experiences into a single, coherent motivational experience is autonomy.

While it is important in its own right, the psychological need for autonomy further underlies students’ intrinsic motivation and self-endorsed goals and values. Intrinsic motivation is engaging an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself or, more formally, it is the inherent propensity to engage one’s interests and to exercise one’s capacities and, in doing so, to explore, to seek out and master optimal challenges, and to learn (Deci & Ryan, 1985). An example of how a student might express intrinsic motivation during a learning activity is to show a high and enduring level of interest, to seek out and find pleasure in optimal
challenge, and to say things such as, "This is fun." Self-endorsed goals and values typically reflect students' autonomous extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation becomes autonomous when students volitionally internalize into the self-system a socially-prescribed way of thinking or behaving (e.g., a goal of graduating high school, a value for practicing a musical instrument). An example of how a student might express a self-endorsed goal or value during instruction is through a high and enduring level of commitment, a valuing of what he or she is doing, as well as uttering sentiment such as, "Even though this is not fun, it is important to me." What is common among students' autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and self-endorsed goals and values is that action flows out of students' internal locus of causality, an experience of feeling free, and a sense of perceived choice in whether or not to engage in the activity.

Teacher's Motivating Style

Motivating style represents the quality or ambience of a teacher's interpersonal style toward students during instructional episodes in which the teacher tries to encourage students to initiate or regulate engagement in a learning activity (Reeve, 2009). For instance, a teacher might try to encourage a student to read a book, follow a rule, or improve performance, and motivating style captures the quality of the teacher's sentiment (the tone of interaction) and behavior (what the teacher says and does) while trying to spark, encourage, and sustain such initiative and persistence. It can be conceptualized along a bi-polar continuum that ranges from a highly controlling style on one end of the continuum through a somewhat controlling or somewhat autonomy-supportive style to a highly autonomy-supportive style on the other end of the continuum (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981). A teacher's motivating style toward students is an important educational construct (and a topic worthy of inclusion in the present book) because students of autonomy-supportive teachers display markedly more positive classroom functioning and educational outcomes than do students of controlling teachers (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Reeve, 2009; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Autonomy support is the interpersonal sentiment and behavior teachers provide during instruction to identify, nurture, and develop students' inner motivational resources (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Reeve, 2006a; Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). In practice, autonomy support is what teachers say and do to first identify, then nurture, and eventually develop and strengthen students' inner motivational resources. That is, using a student's self-endorsed (internalized) value as an example, an autonomy-supportive teacher would initially identify the extent to which the student found the learning activity an important thing to do, asking "Does this seem like a worthwhile thing to do?" The autonomy-supportive teacher would then nurture such a motivational resource by structuring students' time with the learning activity to allow time for students to do what is particularly
important to them. In addition, an autonomy-supportive teacher would create opportunities to develop or strengthen students' lesson-relevant values by explaining how the lesson might be a truly useful thing to do.

The opposite of autonomy support is a controlling motivating style, which is the interpersonal sentiment and behavior teachers provide during instruction to pressure students to think, feel, or behave in a specific (typically teacher-defined) way (Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005; Reeve, 2009; Reeve, Deci et al., 2004). In practice, controlling teachers neglect or discount engagement-fostering aspects of students' inner motivational resources and, instead, try to initiate and regulate students' classroom engagement by (1) telling or prescribing what students are to do and (2) applying subtle or not-so-subtle pressure until students forego their own preferences to adopt the teacher's prescribed course of action. The controlling teacher would recommend an action (e.g., "revise your paper," "follow the rule," "participate more in the group discussion") and add a twist of pressure to raise the likelihood that the student would indeed enact the prescribed action (e.g., offer an incentive, invoke a deadline, use pressuring language such as "pay attention," or "make sure the project is complete, or else it won't count towards class credit").

Part 2. Application to Classroom Practice: How to Become More Autonomy Supportive

In practice, autonomy-supportive acts of instruction include nurturing inner motivational resources, providing rationales, relying on noncontrolling language, displaying patience to allow time for learning, and accepting students' expressions of negative affect (Reeve, 2009). These acts of instruction represent empirically-validated instructional behaviors that have been shown to nurture and support students' experience of autonomy and engagement (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Barch, & Jeon, 2004). As such, each of these five acts of instruction can function as a recommendation as to how teachers might teach in ways that support students' autonomy. Before providing such specifics, however, it might be helpful to pause here for a moment to make four preliminary, but crucially important, points—namely, that students benefit from receiving autonomy support, that teachers benefit from giving autonomy support, that teachers can learn how to become more autonomy supportive, and teachers need to ready themselves to become more autonomy supportive.

Students Benefit from Receiving Autonomy Support

Collectively, the autonomy-supportive acts of instruction to be summarized in Figures 5.1 through 5.5 provide students with an interpersonal relationship that affords them with opportunities to experience learning activities within a
motivational climate of personal autonomy. As mentioned earlier, a wealth of empirical study shows that students benefit when teachers support their autonomy (and they suffer when teachers control their behavior). The important point here is that this conclusion has been shown to be true whether the benefit refers to students’ subsequent motivation (e.g., Reeve et al., 2003), engagement (e.g., Skinner & Belmont, 1993), healthy development (e.g., Deci et al., 1981), learning (e.g., Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, & Deci, 2004), performance (e.g., Black & Deci, 2000), or psychological well-being (e.g., Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999). Further, this conclusion applies to students of all grade levels, including students in undergraduate (Black & Deci, 2000) and graduate (Sheldon & Krieger, 2004) settings. This conclusion also generalizes across a wide range of student characteristics (e.g., gender, grade, special needs, nationality, and cultural value orientation; Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Jang, Reeve, Ryan, & Kim, 2009).

**Teachers Benefit from Giving Autonomy Support**

At first blush, autonomy support seems to be all about giving to others. It certainly benefits students, but it is a fair question to ask if teachers benefit from autonomy giving. Recent research shows that givers of autonomy support do experience meaningful benefits, including an increased sense of personal accomplishment and a decreased sense of emotional exhaustion from their teaching, compared to their relatively controlling classroom counterparts (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007). Giving autonomy support also, over time, leads to greater relationship satisfaction (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006). Thus, like their students, teachers too benefit from the autonomy support they provide.

**Teachers Can Learn How to Become More Autonomy Supportive**

Intervention-based research in which teachers participate in informational and mentoring sessions on how to support students’ autonomy shows that teachers can indeed learn to become more autonomy supportive toward students (Su & Reeve, 2009). Further, this positive training effect has been shown to occur for inexperienced preservice teachers (Reeve, 1998) as well as for highly experienced teachers, including those teaching middle-school (deCharms, 1976), high-school (Reeve, Jang et al., 2004), and college (Williams & Deci, 1996).

**What Teachers Need to do to Ready Themselves to Become More Autonomy Supportive**

Before teachers can become highly autonomy supportive, it seems that they need to approach instruction and student motivation in new ways. The three conditions that make any approach to instruction autonomy supportive are the following: (1) become aware of the students’ perspective during learning activities;
(2) welcome students’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors into the flow of instruction; and (3) support students’ motivational development and capacity for autonomous self-regulation (Reeve, 2009). By taking and integrating the students’ perspective into the day’s lesson plan, teachers become both more willing and more able to create classroom conditions in which students’ autonomous motivations guide their classroom activity. By welcoming students’ ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving into the flow of instruction, teachers acknowledge and appreciate the motivational potential inherent within students’ thoughts, emotions, and behavioral intentions. By acknowledging students’ ongoing developmental capacity for autonomous self-regulation, teacher–student interactions revolve around not only supporting students’ motivation for the day but supporting students’ longer-term (developmental) capacity to generate and regulate academic motivation of their own.

NURTURE INNER MOTIVATIONAL RESOURCES (see Figure 5.1)

Part 1 of this chapter identified four inner motivational resources that teachers can expect all students to possess—the psychological need for autonomy, intrinsic motivation, self-endorsed (intrinsic) goals, and self-endorsed (internalized) values. In addition, students can be expected to possess additional inner motivational resources, including a sense of curiosity, a preference for optimal challenge, and a few others as well (see Reeve, Deci et al., 2004). Nurturing inner motivational resources means building instruction around opportunities to have students’ classroom engagement initiated and regulated by these inner resources. That is, the reason why students engage in the lesson is because it is satisfying (fun),

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**Nurturing Inner Motivational Resources**

(Autonomy-Supportive Instructional Behavior number 1)

*When Teachers Need It Most:*  
* When introducing a learning activity or making a transition to a new activity.  
* When seeking student initiative and initial task engagement.

**Autonomy-Supportive Instruction:**
- Encourage Student Initiative by involving Inner Motivational Resources, such as:  
  - Psychological Need for Autonomy  
  - Intrinsic Motivation  
  - Self-Endorsed Goals and Values  
  - Preference for Optimal Challenge  
  - Sense of Curiosity

**Controlling Instruction:**
- Unencourage Student Initiative by Relying on Environmental Sources of Motivation, such as:  
  - Directives, Commands  
  - Compliance Requests, Assignments  
  - Incentives  
  - Rewards (External Contingencies)

*Why It Is So Important:*  
* Allows students to feel like owners, rather than pawns, during learning activities.  
* Aligns what students do with an authentic sense of wanting to do it.

Figure 5.1 Nurturing inner motivational resources.
meaningful (important), goal-relevant, curiosity-piquing, challenge inviting, etc., and not because they have to (e.g., to obey a directive, to fulfill a request, to earn an incentive such as extra credit points). It is a particularly useful approach to motivation when introducing a learning activity and seeking students’ initial engagement. For instance, autonomy-supportive instruction might begin a lesson with (1) a curiosity-inducing question (e.g., a science teacher might ask, “Which came first—dinosaurs or grass?” Such as question might pique curiosity because, surprisingly, dinosaurs were extinct long before the first grass ever grew. Hence, curiosity around “Where did grass come from?” and “Where did the soil come from?” might add a sense of curiosity to a lesson on plants or the environment), (2) the provision of an optimal challenge (e.g., “Here is a question/problem for you; let’s see if you can figure it out . . .”), or (3) an invitation to use the lesson as an opportunity to make progress on an intrinsic goal (e.g., an English teacher might begin the day’s lesson saying, “Today we are going to read a passage by the writer Philip Roth. As you read, notice how good the writing is. Ask yourself what makes this such good writing, and use your answer to discover how to become a better writer yourself.”). The idea is that students’ naturally want to do what is curiosity-arousing, optimally challenging, and relevant to their personal goals. In contrast, controlling instruction ignores or by-passes opportunities to involve and nurture students’ inner resources and, instead, relies on artificial or pressuring sources of motivation to manufacture student engagement.

Provide Explanatory Rationales (see Figure 5.2)

A rationale is a verbal explanation of why putting forth effort during the activity might be a useful thing to do (Reeve, Jang, Hardre, & Omura, 2002). Providing

![Providing Explanatory Rationales](image)

Figure 5.2 Providing explanatory rationales.
Teaching to Support Autonomy

rationales means communicating to students the usefulness of an activity or course of action, a personal utility that is sometimes (and perhaps often) hidden from students’ awareness or personal experience. That is, as students face a learning activity that they do not really want to do (e.g., “Is it really necessary that we do this?”), teachers can help support students’ otherwise fragile motivation by providing explanatory rationales, such as “The reason I’m asking you to do this is because…” It is a particularly useful approach to motivation when asking students to engage in an activity, follow a rule, or enact a procedure that is an uninteresting thing to do (from their point of view). The idea is that honest, valid, and satisfying rationales afford students an opportunity to internalize the value of what others (e.g., teacher, community) value and request they do. With internalization, students can bring originally extrinsic sources of motivation (“We have a rule that you need to complete this paperwork each month.”) into the self-system as a personally accepted or endorsed source of motivation (“I want to complete the paperwork so I will be eligible for my health care benefits.”). When students do not understand why the teacher is making a request of them, they often view the request as arbitrary, imposed, or simply meaningless busywork. As a rule of thumb, controlling teachers make requests, while autonomy supportive teachers make requests and provide supportive rationale to justify the merit of the request.

Rely on Noncontrolling Language (see Figure 5.3)

Noncontrolling language is communication that is nonevaluative, flexible, and informational. Noncontrolling means avoiding messages that communicate or create pressure (“you should… you have to… you must…” and external

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<td>When Teachers Need Most:</td>
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<td>* When communicating requirements, responsibilities, and feedback.</td>
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Autonomy-Supportive Instruction:
- Communicate Classroom Requirements and Address Problems through Messages that Are:
  - Nonevaluative
  - Flexible
  - Informational

Controlling Instruction:
- Communicate Classroom Requirements and Address Problems through Messages that Are:
  - Evaluative
  - Rigid
  - Pressuring

Why It Is So Important:
- * Maintains a positive student-teacher relationship
- * Helps students diagnose their motivational, behavioral, and performance problems while maintaining their personal responsibility for those problems.

Figure 5.3 Using noncontrolling, informational language.
evaluation. Informational means providing insight that helps the student diagnose, understand, and solve the problem being discussed (e.g., poor performance, listlessness). For instance, autonomy-supportive instruction would begin a discussion of students’ poor performance or woeful class attendance by communicating a problem the teacher has noticed and asking the student about it (e.g., “I’ve noticed that you made a surprisingly low score on the test. Do you know why that might be?”). Relying on noncontrolling and informational language is a particularly useful approach to motivation when communicating requirements and responsibilities, when offering feedback, when discussing strategies, and when addressing the motivational and behavioral problems that might arise during instruction. The idea is to address a problem while preserving students’ sense of ownership and responsibility (i.e., an internal locus of causality) for regulating their own behavior and for solving their own problems. In contrast, controlling instruction verbally pushes and pressurizes the student toward a teacher-specified solution, product, or desired behavior without enlisting the students’ problemsolving effort (e.g., “you must improve your grades.”, “your attendance is not acceptable; I am penalizing you 10 points until your attendance improves.”).

Display Patience to Allow Time for Self-Paced Learning to Occur (see Figure 5.4)

Patience is the calmness a teacher shows as students struggle to understand or adjust their behavior. Straining circumstances such as time constraints and high-stakes testing make it easy to understand why teachers are not patient, but the

![Displaying Patience To Allow Time For Self-paced Learning To Occur](image)

**Figure 5.4** Displaying patience to allow time for self-paced learning to occur.
reason to be patient (motivationally speaking) comes from a deep valuing for the student's internal locus of causality (personal causation) and an understanding that learning processes such as conceptual change and deep processing take time. Displaying patience means that students need both time and space to explore and manipulate learning materials, formulate and test hypotheses, make plans and set goals, monitor and revise their work, and alter their problem-solving strategies. It is a particularly useful approach to motivation when students involve themselves in learning activities that are unfamiliar, complex, or involve the development and refinement of a skill. For instance, autonomy-supportive instruction would postpone advice until understanding the student's goals and perspective and provide scaffolding (e.g., hints when students seem stuck) when it is needed and invited. In contrast, controlling instruction impatiently rushes in to show or tell students the answer or solution (i.e., "Here, let me show you how to do it."), thereby by-passing the learning opportunity itself.

**Acknowledge and Accept Students' Expressions of Negative Affect**
(see Figure 5.5)

Negative affect involves students' complaints, negative emotion and feelings, resistance, counter-protests, and "bad attitude." Acknowledging and accepting such negative affectivity means taking to heart and even welcoming these expressions as potentially valid reactions to imposed rules, assignments, requests, expectations, demands or structures. It is a particularly useful approach to motivation during conflicts as to what teachers want students to do (e.g., read

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### Acknowledging And Accepting Expressions Of Resistance And Negative Feelings

(Autonomy-Supportive Instructional Behavior number 5)

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<td>- Accept</td>
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<td>- Welcome</td>
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**Expressions of Resistance and Negative Feelings as Potentially Valid Reactions to Imposed Demands, Constraints, and Structures.**

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<th>Controlling Instruction: Counter and Try to Change Students' Expressions of Resistance and Negative Feelings:</th>
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<tr>
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<td>- Try to Change</td>
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Such "Bad Attitude" is Unacceptable and Needs to be Changed, Fixed, or Reversed into Something More Acceptable to the Teacher.

*Why It Is So Important:*
- To appreciate the students' perspective, and to give voice to that perspective.
- Creates an opportunity to restructure an otherwise unappealing lesson.

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**Figure 5.5** Acknowledging and accepting expressions of negative affect.
a book, revise a paper) and what students want students to do (e.g., something different, something less demanding). For instance, autonomy-supportive instruction would acknowledge a conflict (e.g., "I see that you all are not very interested in today's lesson."), accept students' expressions of disinterest as potentially valid (e.g., "Yes, we have practiced this same skill many times before."), and welcome students' input and suggestions on how to resolve the conflict (e.g., "Let's see; what might we do differently—any suggestions?"). The idea is that students' negative feelings, if unaddressed, will interfere with their engagement and learning. Soothing negative feelings therefore seems a prerequisite to motivationally readying students to accept the forthcoming lesson and to learn from it. In contrast, controlling instruction does not see students' resistance as valid ("You're immature; you're irresponsible.") and, hence, controlling teachers counter or otherwise try to change that resistance and those negative feelings into something more acceptable to the teacher (e.g., "Quit your complaining; now get to work and do what you are supposed to do.").

Epilogue. Appreciating Carl Rogers: Solving a Key Dilemma of Teaching

Carl Rogers contributed immensely to psychological thinking on personality and motivation. In 1952 he addressed a group of college teachers in which he communicated some rather startling personal reflections on teaching, including "I have lost interest in being a teacher," and "When I try to teach, as I sometimes do, I am appalled by the results, which seem a little more than inconsequential, because sometimes the teaching appears to succeed. When this happens, I find that the results are damaging. It seems to cause the individual to distrust his own experience, and to stifle significant learning. Hence, I have come to feel that the outcomes of teaching are either unimportant or hurtful" (see Rogers, 1969, p. 152).

Rogers' key lamentation was that his well-intended efforts to help others acquire knowledge, develop skill, and realize their potential too often had the unintended side-effect of interfering with their internal locus of causality, internal locus of evaluation, and sense of personal agency as a learner. Part of the problem, and perhaps most of it, is that teachers have two sets of concerns—one for their students but another for the priorities and needs of the school and its curriculum, as teachers worry about their responsibilities to cover the course content, meet state standards, raise students' achievement scores, and answer to concerns and criticisms voiced by various constituents such as parents and school administrators. In this context, a concern over student motivation might at times take a back seat to the teacher's daily pressures and needs (e.g., "I would like to have an interesting group discussion today, but I have to make sure we cover all this material by the end of the week.")
Teachers generally do a good job of promoting and honoring the needs and preferences of the school and its curriculum. The way teachers promote and honor the needs of the school is, generally speaking, to provide students with a highly structured classroom experience in which teachers communicate to students the teacher's (or school's) expectations, standards, expected outcomes, requirements, priorities, goals, plans, and schedule of events (Reeve, 2006b). The problem with structure is that it can, potentially, over-script learning and take a sense of personal responsibility—or what Richard deChamis' (1976) called a sense of “personal causation”—away from students. But it's opposite—permissiveness—is no better, potentially worse even (Hickey, 1997). What Rogers' needed was a viable and workable third option. Our program of research has been about finding that third option, articulating how it is practiced in the classroom, and validating its educational and developmental benefits. That third option is an autonomy-supportive approach to teaching or, more precisely, it is to provide a structured classroom in an autonomy-supportive way (see Jang, Reeve, & Deci, in press).

The classroom challenge autonomy-supportive teachers typically face, motivationally-speaking, is how to introduce students to school-valued expected outcomes, goals, communications, rules, rewards, feedback, and other structure-enhancing elements in autonomy-supportive, rather than controlling, ways. Autonomy support takes the perspective of the student, and it values that perspective. It does not, however, downplay the importance and necessity of taking, valuing, and acting on the teacher's (or school's) perspective during instruction. A teacher's plans, priorities, and goals (i.e., perspective) can be expressed in autonomy-supportive ways. Further, when trained raters observe teachers they consistently find that autonomy-supportive teachers are more likely, not less likely, to offer a highly structured learning environment (Jang et al., in press; Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Soenens, & Dochy, 2009). That is, the same teachers who clearly communicate their expectations, set high standards, introduce classroom goals, make instructional priorities salient, show strong guidance during learning activities, and provide a wealth of feedback are the ones who are more likely (not less likely) to nurture students' inner motivational resources, provide explanatory rationales, rely on noncontrolling language, display patience, and acknowledge and accept expressions of negative affect. This means, in practice, that teachers do not need to totally overhaul what they do in the classroom to become more autonomy supportive. Rather, what it means is that teachers need to adapt what they already do (provide structure) so that they support autonomy rather than control behavior throughout the implementation of the lesson plan and curriculum more generally. The point of the five autonomy-supportive acts of instruction summarized in Figures 5.1 through 5.5 is to supply the information teachers need to make that adaptation.
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