



# **Self Determination Theory Influence on School Students Educational Academic Performance Based on Middle Upper-Class Students and Teachers Perspective**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The SDT is playing a major role in the school students' educational and academic performance. The purpose of this study is to determine SDT's influence on middle-upper-class students' academic performance. This study focuses on autonomy, competence and relatedness and how they influence students' academic performance. This study was trying to find out the interconnection between this theory and students' academic activities. Further for this study, data collection was conducted with students, teachers, and parents through the interviews, focus group discussion, and observations. The data analysis with thematic analysis and interpreting the data. Relatedness is significant in a learning environment, as it fosters a sense of belonging and connection among students and teachers. When students feel connected to their peers and educators, they are more likely to engage actively in their studies and participate in classroom activities. This supportive environment can enhance motivation, leading to improved academic performance and overall well-being. Competence, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in boosting students' confidence in their abilities. When students perceive themselves as capable and skilled, they are more likely to tackle challenging tasks, persist in the face of difficulties, and achieve higher academic success. This sense of competence encourages students to set and pursue ambitious goals, further enhancing their educational outcomes. Competence affects motivation by providing students with a sense of mastery and accomplishment. When students feel competent, they are more inclined to embrace learning opportunities and challenges, as they believe in their ability to succeed. This intrinsic motivation drives them to engage deeply with the material, seek out additional resources, and continuously improve their skills, ultimately leading to sustained academic growth and achievement. The research concluded that, most notably, teacher motivation—particularly autonomous motivation—emerges as a central driving force of students' autonomous motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. When teachers demonstrate autonomous motivation, they tend to adopt more need-supportive teaching practices, which foster students' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Positive teacher-student relationships significantly contribute to student motivation and participation. When students feel respected, emotionally safe, and supported, they are more likely to engage, seek help, and take academic risks.

Keywords: Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness, interconnection and motivation

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## **1. Introduction**

Deci and Ryan (2012) developed Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and its widely influence in students psychology. This theory emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation in human behavior and personal development. The theory suggests that individuals are most likely to perform well and thrive when they have their basic psychological needs satisfied—specifically the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the context of education, SDT suggests that students are more likely to excel academically when they feel a sense of control over their learning, perceive themselves as capable learners, and experience supportive relationships with peers, teachers, and family members. Student motivation is an important precursor to learning, and therefore, is a meaningful aspect of any successful classroom experience (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

While SDT has been applied to various educational settings, its influence on the academic performance of middle- and upper-class students offers a unique perspective. These students, often characterized by relatively stable family environments and access to academic resources, may experience a different dynamic in terms of motivation and performance compared to their peers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Understanding how SDT operates in this demographic can offer valuable insights into how academic environments can be tailored to maximize student engagement, foster intrinsic motivation, and enhance educational outcomes.

This study aims to explore the influence of Self-Determination Theory on the academic performance of middle upper-class school students. By focusing on this specific group, the research seeks to investigate how the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence on students' motivation, engagement, and overall academic success. Given the distinct sociocultural and educational advantages often associated with middle and upper-class backgrounds, this study will investigate into the significance ways these students' academic experiences are shaped by the principles of SDT and how they can be harnessed to optimize learning outcomes.

Self-determination theory has been widely applied in the field of education, particularly in improving students' learning motivation and academic performance. SDT emphasize that students' learning motivation is influenced not only by personal interest but also by how teachers design learning environments, organize classroom activities, and support students' autonomy.

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## 2. Research Objectives

Purpose of this study to investigate the Role of Autonomy in Academic Motivation to explore how students' sense of autonomy (the ability to make choices and control their learning) affects their academic motivation, engagement, and performance within middle upper-class school settings.

Explore the Assess the Impact of Competence on Academic Achievement to examine how students' perception of their competence (belief in their ability to succeed in academic tasks) influences their academic performance, self-efficacy, and persistence in schoolwork.

Identify the Influence of Relatedness on Academic Motivation to assess how the presence of supportive relationships—both within the school environment (with peers and teachers) and outside of it (with family)—contributes to students' intrinsic motivation and academic outcomes.

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## 3. Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between students' perceived autonomy and their academic performance?
2. How does students' perceived competence influence their academic motivation and success?
3. In what ways do supportive relationships with peers, teachers, and family (relatedness) contribute to academic motivation and performance?

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## 4. Research methodology

To explore the influence of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) on the academic performance of middle and upper-class students, this study will adopt a qualitative approach. The combination of this methods will allow for a understanding of the research problem and objectives of this study.

This study used a qualitative method to identify the school Middle upper-class students teachers and parents in secondary schools (grades 6-9) in urban areas. Sampling population will be considered as a stratified random sampling method to ensure diversity within the middle upper-class categories, focusing on: Students from different Sri Lanka government schools. Different age groups to see how SDT-related factors evolve over time. Balanced representation of both genders and a mix of academic disciplines.

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## 5. Data collection

For this study data collection got from 08 Sri Lanka government schools Students Teachers and parents. From grade 06 to Grade 09 selected 10 students from each grade as well as the schools categorized in boys schools and girls schools separately. In this sense 40 students from a boys schools and 40 students from girls school. Number of the students 80. At the same time teachers from each grade per teacher selected for interview. Therefore, altogether 08 teachers further parents 80.

This study conducted on last year almost four months covered to collected the data. when we do the interview the class teacher was not in classroom as well the data collection was done by the proper channel permission. Moreover we already informed to the school and the students that confidential matter as well the important of this data. after the data collection from students we met the class teacher and given the separate questionnaire as well we conducted the parents those who willing to interest in this research. moreover those interviewed students and their parents only we met and collected the data.

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## 6. Measures

All the responded conducted by the interview, focus group discussion and observation in the classroom.

Theoretical premises We confirmed several fundamental premises of SDT: the Class teacher supportive practices to the students its more satisfying the students basic needs. Which influence students autonomous motivation as well. Additionally its turn in to the students achievement. Teacher need-supportive practices satisfy student basic needs, which facilitate student autonomous motivation, which in turn aids achievement. However students more giving a much interest thing it teachers Motivation rather than students autonomy motivation. In contrast the Teacher motivation was positively linked to student motivation. Specifically, teachers with more autonomous motivation had students with more autonomous motivation. In contrast, neither teachers' controlled motivation nor a motivation were significantly linked to those of their students.

Teacher motivation, especially autonomous motivation, positively influences student motivation. As the results the Students tend to show higher autonomous motivation when their teachers are autonomously motivated.

The connection in-between teacher and student motivation is mediated by need-supportive teaching practices at the same time students' psychological need satisfaction too. Teachers with higher autonomous motivation were show that using more need-supportive strategies which led students to feel greater autonomy and competence. However the teacher autonomous motivation supporting to student autonomy on the other hand their competence. As the results students needs their teachers supportive to motivated themselves.

Students don't feel more freedom help them to their study. However the students still expecting the teachers guideline as well they feel more autonomy inside the classroom its make them in to more careless. Most of the answers like this "Sometimes I like when the teacher explains everything clearly."some of the students answered I enjoy flipped classrooms—we get to explore things on our own."

Students likes to balance between freedom and support; autonomy boosts ownership and effort; not all students are ready for full independence.

### **6.1. Autonomy Increases Motivation and Engagement**

Many students expressed that when they have control over their learning—such as choosing topics or methods—they feel more interested and motivated.

*"I try harder when I pick the topic myself."*

*"It makes school more fun and less stressful."*

### **6.2. Confidence Affects Strategy and Effort**

Students who feel academically competent are more likely to use effective study habits and persist through challenges.

*"If I think I can do it, I want to try."*

*"If I feel confident, I don't need rewards to stay motivated."*

Between the teachers and students the Positive Relationships Foster Engagement Students feel safe and respected, Trust leads to participation, Engagement increases when students feel value Many teachers replied as like this

*"Even the quiet students start to open up when they know I support them."*

Further Teachers believe emotional safety and mutual respect drive student engagement and willingness to participate.

### **6.3. Encouragement Builds Self-Efficacy**

Some of the Codes are used such as, Belief in student potential; Praise effort, not just achievement; Small wins boost confidence According to this findings the teachers understanding that, their support as crucial in helping students develop a growth mindset and self-belief. The mediating role of Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy plays a mediating role between motivation and academic performance. However the Zhiqiang Zhao, Ping Ren & Qian Yang (2024) found that students' self-management skills improve academic performance by enhancing self-efficacy. This suggests that enhancing students' self-efficacy can effectively promote academic achievement. Further, self determination theory emphasizes that factors like intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy have a positive impact on academic performance. Educators should focus on nurturing students' intrinsic motivation, enhancing their self-efficacy, and considering individual differences such as gender to promote academic success.

### **6.4. Approach-ability Increases Help-Seeking Behavior**

Open communication, Reduces fear of judgment, Improves academic honesty

Many teachers responded this "They're more honest about what they don't understand."

Teachers who are warm and open are more likely to see students asking for help, which improves learning outcomes.

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## **7. Conclusion**

The findings from interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations confirm key principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in educational settings. Most notably, teacher motivation—particularly autonomous motivation—emerges as a central drive force of students' autonomous motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. When teachers demonstrate autonomous motivation, they tend to adopt more need-supportive teaching practices, which foster students' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Students, in turn, respond positively to such supportive environments. While they appreciate opportunities for autonomy—such as choosing topics or learning methods—they more interesting the value structure, clarity, and guidance from their teachers. A balance between freedom and support appears critical: full autonomy without scaffolding can lead to disengagement, while thoughtful teacher guidance enhances student confidence and persistence. Perceptions of autonomy support authenticity. Feeling autonomous increases people's sense of freedom to implement practices in a way that is appropriate

with their own values, beliefs, and sense of self. When perceived autonomy is defeated, people are likely to feel threatened, become defensive and disengagement from activities as a means of self-protection (Skinner & Edge, 2002).

Characterize by quality relationships; a strong sense of relatedness leads to increased perceptions of attachment and well-being at the individual level (Reeve et al., 2018). Conversely, when the need for relatedness is unfulfilled, negative reactions occur including withdrawal and decreased feelings of well-being (Skinner & Edge, 2002). Furthermore, positive teacher-student relationships significantly contribute to student motivation and participation. When students feel respected, emotionally safe, and supported, they are more likely to engage, seek help, and take academic risks. Teachers' encouragement and belief in student potential help cultivate self-efficacy and a growth mindset, reinforcing the importance of emotional and relational dynamics in the classroom.

In summary, teacher motivation—especially when it is autonomous—not only shapes their own teaching practices but also deeply influences students' motivation and success. Effective educational environments are those where teachers are both motivated and supportive, and where students experience a healthy balance of autonomy, structure, and emotional safety.

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