

# Intrinsic Motivation: Impact on Learning Disabilities Literature

Endang Erwani Md Dom

Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu  
Malaysia

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the general principles of intrinsic motivation (IM) from the lens of Self-determination Theory in education setting. Though there are studies on regular students and those with Learning Disabilities (LD), the latter group can benefit from more rigorous studies done on them. This is especially true since IM was found to be significant in the achievement and adjustment of students with LD. Findings from this review listed a few psychological concepts worthy of focus for increasing these students' IM. Firstly, the effective management of extrinsic motivation enhances the IM of students with LD when they are perceived as structure rather than a controlling factor. Secondly, the three psychological needs; autonomy, competence, and relatedness were studied on the group. The perceived competence of the group was found to be central to their IM compared to the need for autonomy. Consequently, relatedness was found to be an influence and relevant to the population's IM. As for Malaysia's literature on the LD population, it is found to be scarce. While the research on IM is rarely found, the limited ones are on student's self-concept. In conclusion, studies on students with LD in Malaysia should focus on IM using the SDT psychological concepts.

**Keywords:** Intrinsic Motivation, Learning Disabilities, Children, Self-Determination Theory, Malaysia.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The implementation of Inclusive Education (IE) has been an interest of many researchers, as they represent the democratizations of education and justice for the students with disabilities population. However, little research is done on the quality of the education and well-being of the students with learning disabilities (LD) involved in the IE. Researchers suggest that the education for students with LD as more than just the opportunity for education rather it should also fulfill the needs of the students (Faircloth, 2008; Zalizan & Manisah, 2014). Consequently, other researchers urge that studies explore the ways for students with LD cope with IE (Mohd Zuki & Nik Abd Rahman, 2016).

Recent studies acknowledged that there is a need to study on psychological factors of students with LD in Malaysia (Muhamad Nadhir & Alfa Nur Aini, 2016) and worldwide (Raja, & Kumar, 2011). The LD literature on motivation, for instance, is inadequate (Sideridis, 2006; Zisimopoulos & Galanaki, 2009) and limited guidance is available for educators to support IM of SEN students in classrooms (Frazier, 2015). Research on promoting IM among students with disabilities is diffuse (Frazier, 2015). As for the participants of research, the discussions on learning motivation among the population of LD are adolescents and young adults. (Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik & Kreil, 2001). Young children are rarely included in the research. This paper intends to review the literature done on students with LD concerning their psychological aspects and intrinsic motivation.

### **2.0 Worldview of Human Nature Embracing Intrinsic Motivation**

Before exploring the study of intrinsic motivation, discussing the worldview of human nature is significant because the differences in describing the concept will go back to the contrasting conceptions of human nature that the descriptions hold (Chand & Prakash, 2004). The discussion of intrinsic motivation can be stated within these three criteria of human nature held by organismic perspectives. Firstly, is the concept that humans consist of the physical and spiritual dimensions (psychological aspects such as thinking and feelings). This physical-spiritual constituent is significant in attempting to understand the motivation phenomenon. Secondly, is humans have tendencies that are self-determining and use them to make own volitions and choices without external influence. Finally, even though equipped with self-determining tendencies, humans are also endowed with dialectic inclinations that will make them utilize the tendencies to virtue or otherwise. From this worldview, motivation is considered as a subjective experience that is significant, feasible subject of interest in Psychology in spite of much debates and criticisms. To explore the intrinsic motivation among the Special Education population, (Deci, Hodges, Pierson, & Tomassone, 1992) pointed out the significance of applying the general principles of education. This paper intends to use lens of the Self-determination Theory in describing the intrinsic motivation of the children with LD.

### **3.0 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**

The Self-determination Theory (SDT), introduced by Ryan and Deci (2000), is a macro-theory of human motivation, personality development, and well-being (Ryan, 2009). In describing the phenomenon of motivation, the theory focuses on the psychological aspect of humans such as the perception, cognitions, emotion and needs to predict regulatory, behavioural and experiential outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

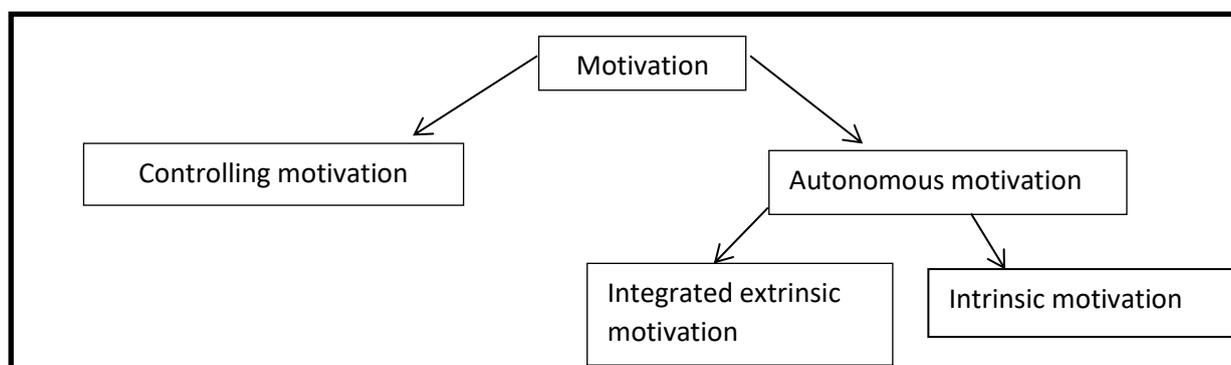


Figure 2.1: SDT type of motivation

The human taxonomy of motivation presented by SDT considers that it is more useful to explore motivation by regarding the type of motivation; and not seeing it as total amount of motivation people have. The theory differentiates motivation to autonomous and controlling motivation and affirms that autonomous motivation lead to higher quality and maintenance of learning (Deci & Ryan, 2015) although both bring forth academic achievements compared to amotivation, a state of not being motivated. Deci and Ryan (2016) posit that the most significant message in their review is that autonomous motivation produces academic achievement more than controlling motivation. They suggest that discovering autonomous motivation can be done best in the representation of intrinsic motivation which is a natural internal motivation involving interest and enjoyment (Deci & Ryan, 2015).

Consequently, the nature of IM has been discussed by numerous studies. Researchers of IM conclude it as a natural innate tendency (Adelman & Taylor, 1990; Deci, 1975; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the prototype of self-determination (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991) and autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2015). Some researchers (Pintrich, 2003; Wigfield, Cambria, & Eccles, 2013) suggest that though motives can be conscious, they are usually assumed to be implicit. IM is doing something without apparent external reward (e.g. Cohen, 1986; Deci et al., 1991; Schelechty, 2011) for example curiosity, participating, completing (Dev, 1997), and the work itself (Deci et al., 1991; Schelechty, 2011). An example of this is the act of curious (Dev, 1997) baby reaching out and exploring the surrounding without any external control, rewards or encouragement (Deci, Hodges, Pierson, & Tomassone, 1992). Humans at a very young age with limited capacities and strength, in their healthiest state, are able to reach out (Ryan & Deci, 2000), emanate from the self and fully endorse own behaviour (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991).

IM is also is described as opposite of extrinsic motivation that focuses on controlling behaviour using rewards or reprimanding punishments. Researchers dispute over the importance and application of extrinsic motivation in classrooms (Cameron & Pierce, 2002; Weiser, 2014; Witzel & Mercer, 2003). The issue had been on rewards that undermine IM (Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000). However, effective management of extrinsic rewards is found useful for students with LD with low IM (Cameron & Pierce, 2002; Carlson, Booth, Shin, & Canu, 2001; Weiser, 2014). The on-going discussions had arrived at a particular conclusion that praise under certain conditions, for informing and guiding purposes, however, plays a role in motivating students and should be practiced by the teacher (Ensign, Hargrave & Lasso, 2008). Indeed, the Behaviourism have made contributions in highlighting the extrinsic motivation of human that maintains students work hard to receive rewards and stopped fooling around in class lest the teacher will punish him. Nevertheless, teachers should train students' extrinsic motivation through internalization process so that they become intrinsically motivated.

Studies on IM listed the criteria of behaviour that emanate from IM. The behaviour displays these characteristics; not requiring control (Deci et al., 1992) or external reward (Cohen, 1986), self-endorsed (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991) and seeks challenges and exercises competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

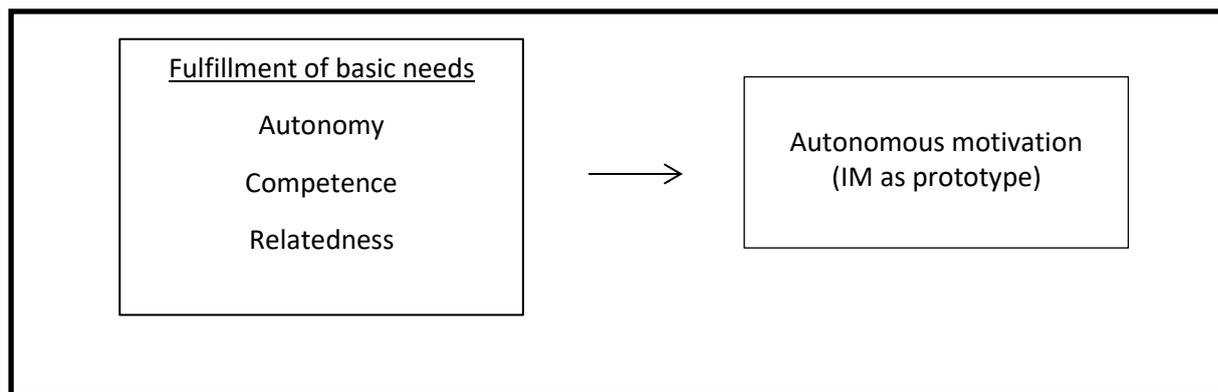


Figure 2: SDT's mediator of IM

The above-said characteristics are in line with the psychological needs that SDT noted as mediating autonomous motivation i.e. autonomy, competence and relatedness, which are presented as nutrients for psychological health and well-being and elements that enhance intrinsic motivation. Deci and Ryan (2015) acknowledged intrinsic motivation as a prototype for autonomous motivation research.

#### 4.0 Findings on the Intrinsic Motivation of The Learning Disabled Population

Some researchers delineate the importance of IM among the LD population as a significant area of research. IM is considered as an important variable for the achievement and adjustment of students with LD (Deci, Hodges, Pierson & Tomassone, 1992). They noted the internal motivation of students receiving SEN services was found to be significant for their adjustments and academic achievement. In his study on students with LD, Dev (1997) found that the academic IM of students with LD correlated with their academic achievement. Regarding the autonomy psychological need of students with LD, it was found that it is not central to the children's central psychological dynamic on motivation compared to those with emotional handicaps (Deci et al., 1992). However, as an extension to SDT's discussion on the need for autonomy, (Wehmeyer, 1998) had come up with the Functional Model of Self-determination that gives the meaning of autonomy for people with disabilities a more functional meaning that needs and can be satisfied appropriately.

Another motivational factor that has been studied among the population is encouraging competence among students with LD (Adelman, 1978; Cohen, 1986; Deci et al., 1992). Harter's study (1977) discovered that students with mental delays derive pleasure from challenging tasks (cited in Adelman, 1978). Deci et al.'s (1992) study on students with LD concluded that the competence variable also correlates with achievement and adjustment among students with LD.

Finally, relatedness as a motivational factor implies the importance of the environment as a supporting or thwarting factor for IM for students with LD. Adding to Deci et al's (1992) study, it is also suggested that classroom settings and teachers can influence internal behaviour control (Ensign, Hargrave, & Lasso, 2008) i.e. intrinsic motivation.

As for the LD population in Malaysia, the research focus on student psychological factors found is limited and scattered. The self-concept of primary students with LD in Malaysia was found in a study (Loh, 2006) which concluded the correlation between general self-concept and learning achievement. The following studies found (Nurul Aina, 2017; Safiah, 2016) were also on self-concept of students with LD in IE settings. The quantitative study found that their

level of self-concept is at a moderate level while the qualitative study found that IE has given a good impact on the participant's self-concept such as the interest. Most researches done on LD are usually from teacher perspective or concerning teacher education and readiness.

### **5.0 Conclusion**

IM of children with LD can be appropriately explored and described using the SDT suggestion on the satisfaction of three psychological needs; autonomy, competence and relatedness. Studies were conducted on these variables though developing more studies on this idiosyncratic group can still be a benefit. This is especially true in Malaysia setting where motivational studies on students with LD are hardly appreciated. Literature found in Malaysia on the population was concerning their self-concept. The focus should be expanded to other psychological concepts that are related to IM. Students should be the focus and their perspective should be appreciated so as more meaningful data can be collected and applied in preparing and providing more quality IE.

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### **Corresponding Author**

#### **Endang Erwani Md Dom**

Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu Malaysia

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