

# Can Schools Nurture Children?

Thesis Research in Psychology At Two Alternative Schools by Don Berg

For over 30 years many studies done in traditional schools from a variety research paradigms have consistently shown that those schools fail at nurturing children by thwarting basic psychological needs as indicated by declines in intrinsic motivation in elementary through high schools. However, one study done over 10 years ago suggested that a group of home schooled children did not decline in their intrinsic motivation and that inspired this research project.

For this inquiry nurturing means meeting basic needs as a matter of course. For instance, physiological nurturing depends on meeting basic needs for water and biological nutrients. In this case I was concerned with psychological nurturing so we used Self-Determination Theory (SDT) created by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan which posits basic psychological needs for perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (see the Attitutor Guide to Motivation.) In the SDT research tradition there has been ample data showing that intrinsic motivation depends on meeting those three basic psychological needs. So, the key indicator of need satisfaction was children's self-reported levels of intrinsic motivation for the typical activities expected in school.



This study was conducted with the cooperation of Village Home Education Resource Center (Village Home/ VHERC) and the Village Free School (VFS) under the supervision of Prof. Jennifer Henderlong Corpus as part of my thesis project for a degree in Psychology from Reed College. It was inspired by Nicolas Apostoleris study of home schooled students in Massachusetts in 2000. Apostoleris interpreted his data to indicate a pattern of increasing intrinsic motivation but used a measure that tied extrinsic and intrinsic motivation together like two ends of a teeter totter. The measure used in my study treated the different aspects of the motivation spectrum (with three levels of extrinsic motivation) as separate, so they would be more like four swings in a swing set that move independently.

My data suggest that, unlike traditional schools, the students in these two alternative schools maintained their levels of intrinsic motivation (IM). There was a suggestion that external regulation (the extreme of extrinsic motivation) may have declined in the VHERC students (49 of the 57 participants) supporting the idea that Apostoleris pattern may have been a teeter-totter-style illusion of change in IM.

Therefore, these schools, as a matter of course, must have met the basic psychological needs of their students and may be considered to be nurturing schools. Caveat: this was a small cross-sectional study so the findings should be construed as suggestive, not conclusive. Longitudinal data with larger samples would be more conclusive. This tentative finding is supported by recent work on Israeli democratic schools showing maintenance of motivation to learn science from fifth to eighth grades by measures of students' mastery goals and engagement (Vedder-Weiss & Fortus, 2011).

**Answer: Yes**, some schools like Village Home and the Village Free School do nurture children. But catalyzing change towards nurturing in traditional schools will require organized advocacy for policies that explicitly require schools to become nurturing places.  
For More Information: <http://www.teach-kids-attitude-1st.com/intrinsic-motivation-research.html>

# Why U.S. Teachers Fall Into The Control Habit

Source: "Why Teachers Adopt a Controlling Motivating Style Toward Students and How They Can Become More Autonomy Supportive" by Johnmarshall Reeve, *Educational Psychologist*, 44(3), 159-175, 2009

## Pressure From Above (Outside the classroom)

**Teachers occupy an inherently powerful social role.**

*Teacher-student interactions take place within a context of an interpersonal power differential.*

**Teachers harbor the dual burdens of responsibility and accountability.**

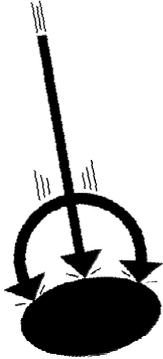
*Teachers routinely face job conditions steeped in accountability and responsibility for student behaviors and outcomes.*

**Teachers are aware that controlling is culturally valued.**

*The U.S. culture generally evaluates teachers who use controlling instructional strategies as more competent than teachers who use autonomy-supportive strategies.*

**Sometimes control is mistakenly equated with structure.**

*Controlling strategies are often inappropriately associated with a structured learning environment, whereas autonomy supportive strategies are often inappropriately associated with chaotic or laissez-faire one.*



## Pressure From Below (Inside the classroom)

**Teachers react to student passivity during learning activities.**

*Episodically unmotivated or episodically unengaged students tend to pull a controlling style out of teachers.*

## Pressure From Within (Inside themselves)

**Teachers mistaken belief in the maximal-operant principle.**

*Teachers may believe that large rewards can "turn on" students motivation. This belief suggests little awareness that*

*(a) rewards might also "turn off" students' motivation and*

*(b) students already harbor inner motivational resources that are fully capable of self-generating the energy needed to engage in learning activities.*

**Teachers may harbor control-oriented personality dispositions.**

*Some teachers are motivationally or dispositionally oriented toward a controlling style.*



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