



Teachers become more autonomy supportive after they believe it is easy to do[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Several carefully designed autonomy-supportive intervention programs (ASIPs) have shown that PE teachers can learn how to become significantly more autonomy supportive toward students. The present study investigated why these ASIPs work. We hypothesized that ASIPs work to the extent they help PE teachers conceptually change their beliefs about how effective and how easy-to-implement autonomy-supportive teaching is.

Design: The design was both experimental and longitudinal.

Method: Forty-two full-time PE teachers (30 males, 12 females) from 42 different Korean secondary schools were randomly assigned into either an experimental (intervention) or control group, and we assessed three measures of autonomy-supportive teaching as dependent measures and the two beliefs about autonomy-supportive teaching as predictor variables at the beginning and end of a 17-week semester. **Results:** Teachers in the experimental group showed significant end-of-semester increases in all three measures of autonomy support (η^2_p ranged from .23 to .34) and in both beliefs about autonomy support (η^2_p ranged from .29 to .39). Most importantly, mediation analyses showed that it was intervention-induced changes in the easy-to-implement belief that fully explained the post-intervention increases in autonomy support.

Conclusion: We suggest that ASIPs work by helping teachers revise their belief about autonomy-supportive teaching from “it is hard and difficult” to “it is actually quite feasible and easy—once one knows how to do it.”

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According to self-determination theory (SDT), people possess inherent psychological needs that, when appreciated and supported by the social context, are fully capable of energizing their engagement, positive functioning, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The social context best appreciates and supports people's psychological needs through the provision of autonomy support (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981; Reeve, 2009). When autonomy supportive, PE teachers, athletic coaches, and exercise instructors tend to (1) take the perspective of their students, athletes, and clients (e.g., conduct formative assessments to ask what they want, need, think, and prefer); (2) introduce

activities that vitalize and support (rather than neglect or frustrate) the psychological needs; (3) provide explanatory rationales for their requests; (4) communicate using informational (rather than pressuring) language; (5) acknowledge and accept expressions of negative affect; and (6) display patience (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Reeve, 2009, 2015a). These six acts of autonomy-supportive behavior are all positively intercorrelated, mutually supportive, and synergistic (Cheon, Reeve, Yu, & Jang, 2014; Deci et al., 1994). Collectively, they convey an interpersonal message of support and understanding (e.g., “I am your ally; I am here to support you and your strivings.”) that others generally find to be need supportive (Reeve, 2015b).

In the context of PE instruction, teacher-provided autonomy support benefits both students and teachers. As to student benefits, students taught by autonomy-supportive PE teachers, compared to those taught by non-autonomy-supportive PE teachers, experience higher-quality motivation (i.e., greater need satisfaction and greater autonomous motivation, lesser need frustration and lesser amotivation) and display numerous educational benefits, such as greater

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classroom engagement, conceptual learning, skill development, academic achievement, and psychological well-being (Assor et al., 2002; Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Cheon & Reeve, 2013, 2015; Cheon, Reeve, Lee, & Lee, 2015; Cheon, Reeve, & Moon, 2012; Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Soenens, & Matos, 2005). Further, PE students' high-quality (autonomous) motivation has been linked to multiple indicators of their classroom and leisure time physical activity levels (e.g., accelerometers, pedometers, heart rate, self-report, raters' observations; Owen, Smith, Lubans, Ng, & Lonsdale, 2014). As to teacher benefits, PE teachers who participate in ASIP, compared to PE teachers in a no-intervention control group, report greater post-intervention teaching motivation (need satisfaction, autonomous motivation, and intrinsic goals), teaching skill (teaching efficacy), and teaching well-being (vitality, job satisfaction, lesser emotional and physical exhaustion) (Cheon et al., 2014). As SDT researchers became increasingly aware of the benefits of autonomy-supportive teaching, they began to design intervention programs to help PE teachers learn how to become more autonomy supportive during instruction.

1. Autonomy-supportive intervention programs (ASIPs)

An autonomy-supportive intervention program (ASIP) is a step-by-step plan of action to help teachers become more autonomy supportive toward students. When PE teachers participate in carefully-designed, theory-based (self-determination theory) ASIPs, they learn how to become more autonomy supportive (Aelterman, Vansteenkiste, Van den Berghe, De Meyer, & Haerens, 2014; Chatzisarantis & Hagger, 2009; Cheon & Reeve, 2013; Cheon et al., 2012, 2014; Edmunds, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2008; Fenner, Straker, Davis, & Hagger, 2013; Moustaka, Vlachopoulos, Kabitsis, & Theodorakis, 2012; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Tessier, Sarrazin, & Ntoumanis, 2008). Further, these intervention-enabled changes in teachers' autonomy-supportive motivating style tend to be more than just temporary or situationally-induced changes, because follow-up investigations show that these teachers continue to show a highly autonomy-supportive style one year later (Cheon & Reeve, 2013; Reeve et al., 2004). The conclusion from about a dozen carefully designed and implemented ASIPs is that these teacher-focused interventions produce large and enduring effect sizes (Reeve & Cheon, 2014).

Given the rather large supportive literature on the utility of ASIPs, we investigated the new question of, "Why do these interventions work?" Answering this question is important because doing so will enable a better and more sophisticated understanding of the antecedents of developing a more autonomy-supportive style, and it will also enable educators to design and implement enhanced professional developmental opportunities, including not only formal intervention programs but also teacher-focused workshops, in-service programs, and mentoring programs.

Many factors explain why teachers might (or might not) adopt a more autonomy-supportive style toward students, including the social context in which they teach (Taylor, Ntoumanis, & Smith, 2009), the characteristics of the students they teach (Pelletier, Séguin-Levesque, & Legault, 2002), administrative supports vs. pressures (Pelletier & Sharp, 2009), pre-service and in-service training experiences (Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990), the extent to which their own psychological needs are satisfied vs. thwarted during teaching (Taylor, Ntoumanis, & Standage, 2008), personality dispositions (Van den Berghe et al., 2013), the culture in which they live and teach (Downie, Koestner, ElGeledi, & Cree, 2004), and the beliefs they hold about autonomy-supportive teaching (Roth & Weinstock, 2013). Most of these influences are not very malleable and few can be addressed in an intervention program. The glaring exception is teachers' beliefs about autonomy-supportive teaching.

2. Beliefs about autonomy-supportive teaching

Previous research reveals that three specific beliefs underlie teachers' high vs. low tendency toward autonomy-supportive teaching (Aelterman et al., 2014; Reeve, 1998; Reeve et al., 2014; Roth & Weinstock, 2013). These three beliefs are that autonomy-supportive teaching is (a) an effective way to motivate and engage students ("effectiveness belief"), (b) relatively easy to implement during instruction ("easy-to-implement belief"), and (c) a culturally normative way to teach ("normative belief").

The effectiveness belief reflects the teacher's judgment that students benefit in terms of motivation, engagement, learning, and achievement when teachers offer autonomy-supportive teaching. The easy-to-implement belief reflects the teacher's judgment that autonomy-supportive teaching is easy (vs. difficult) to do during instruction, as teachers see it as a feasible (plausible), time-efficient, and practical (not just idealistic) way to motivate and engage students. The normative belief reflects the teacher's judgment that autonomy-supportive teaching is an accepted, expected, and commonplace way to motivate and engage students among one's peer teachers.

When an ASIP produces positive effects, it does so by helping teachers work through an accommodation process (i.e., conceptual change) about how they think about their motivating style toward students (Reeve, 1998). For instance, many teachers harbor a not-so-positive view of autonomy-supportive teaching (Turner, 2010; Turner, Warzon, & Christensen, 2011). For these teachers, conceptual change is difficult and not at all certain (Weinstein, Madison, & Kuklinski, 1995), largely because these teachers harbor pre-existing beliefs that oppose autonomy-supportive teaching (i.e., namely, that it is a generally ineffective, difficult-to-implement, and culturally non-normative approach to instruction; Reeve, 1998). We focused on teachers' beliefs about autonomy-supportive teaching because findings from the conceptual change literature show that teachers' willingness to adopt practically any new teaching practice is a function of their motivational beliefs (Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993) and their judgments of how useful and feasible the new teaching practice is believed to be (Posner, Strike, Hewson, & Gertzog, 1982).

To help teachers work through what may sometimes be a difficult conceptual change process, we designed the present ASIP to focus on the two pivotal teacher beliefs of (a) how effective (vs. ineffective) and (b) how easy-to-implement (vs. difficult-to-implement) autonomy-supportive teaching is believed to be (Reeve et al., 2014). That is, we designed the ASIP in the current study to produce a significant main effect to enable positive changes in teachers' beliefs about how effective and how easy-to-implement autonomy-supportive teaching is believed to be (once one knows how to do it).

We assessed both teacher beliefs at the beginning and end of the semester, and we examined the relations of both beliefs to teachers' autonomy-supportive teaching at the beginning of the semester and to changes in autonomy-supportive teaching at the end of the semester. We expected both beliefs to be significantly correlated with teachers' initial endorsement of autonomy-supportive teaching, because this result has been reported in the literature (Aelterman et al., 2014; Reeve et al., 2014). But the focus of the present study was on the contribution of ASIP-induced changes in these beliefs to an end-of-semester change in autonomy-supportive teaching. Specifically, we predicted that a carefully-designed ASIP would produce a large positive main effect to change both the effectiveness and the easy-to-implement beliefs, and also that the ASIP-induced changes in these two beliefs would answer and explain our driving research question, which as "Why do ASIPs work to help teachers become more autonomy supportive?"

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