

# TO WHAT EXTENT DOES EXPERIENCING STRUCTURED AUTONOMY SUPPORT ENHANCE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT AMONG IB PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS?

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## Introduction

This action research investigates how teacher support for autonomy affects intrinsic motivation and academic engagement among high school IB Psychology students. The problem identified is that while autonomy-supportive teaching generally enhances motivation, its effectiveness varies across students, especially in demanding academic settings like the IB program. This issue is important because motivation directly impacts student learning and success, yet poorly scaffolded autonomy can lead to disengagement and stress, particularly for lower-achieving students. Research shows that autonomy support fosters student engagement and persistence (Reeve, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000), but excessive freedom without structure may overwhelm some learners (Stefanou et al., 2004). Addressing this problem can help educators tailor instruction that balances choice and guidance, improving outcomes in rigorous curricula.

### Background of the Problem

At Universal American School, the IB Psychology class consists of students with mixed academic abilities, students have zero prior knowledge of Psychology before they enter the IB Psychology classroom. The challenge is that although autonomy-supportive practices are encouraged, some students struggle with open-ended tasks and research requirements intrinsic to the IB curriculum. This problem is ongoing and urgent because without proper scaffolding, students risk disengagement and reduced motivation, which could lower achievement and satisfaction. If no changes are made, less confident students may continue to feel overwhelmed, while more capable students may thrive but without inclusive strategies for all. Enhancing structured autonomy will benefit all students by fostering motivation while providing necessary support.

## Literature Review

This action research investigates how teacher support for autonomy affects intrinsic motivation and academic engagement among high school IB Psychology students. The problem identified is that while autonomy-supportive teaching generally enhances motivation, its effectiveness varies across students, especially in demanding academic settings like the IB program. This issue is important because motivation directly impacts student learning and success, yet poorly scaffolded autonomy can lead to disengagement and stress, particularly for lower-achieving students. Research shows that autonomy support fosters student engagement and persistence (Reeve, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000), but excessive freedom without structure may overwhelm some learners (Stefanou et al., 2004). Addressing this problem can help educators tailor instruction that balances choice and guidance, improving outcomes in rigorous curricula.

## Methods

Action research was chosen to actively investigate and improve teaching practices in a real classroom setting. This approach allows constant cycles of reflection and adjustment tailored to student needs. The research aimed to explore how autonomy support influences motivation and engagement, and how it can be optimized for a diverse classroom.

### Methodology

Students were asked questions before intervention and after. The intervention involved providing students with opportunities for choice in their revision topics and assignments, within a structured framework that included clear guidelines and teacher support. Collaboration occurred with IB Psychology students and the classroom teacher. Data collection included a Likert-scale questionnaire

measuring perceived autonomy support, intrinsic motivation, and engagement, alongside open-ended questions capturing student experiences. One research cycle was completed involving 10 students of varied academic levels.

### Participants

The sample included 10 IB Psychology students (grades 4–7), representing a range of academic abilities and confidence levels.

### Data Collection

Data was gathered via a 12-item Likert-scale questionnaire and open-ended reflection prompts before and after tasks that revolved around autonomy. The questionnaire targeted perceptions of autonomy support, motivation, and engagement. Open responses explored subjective experiences with autonomy before and after the intervention.

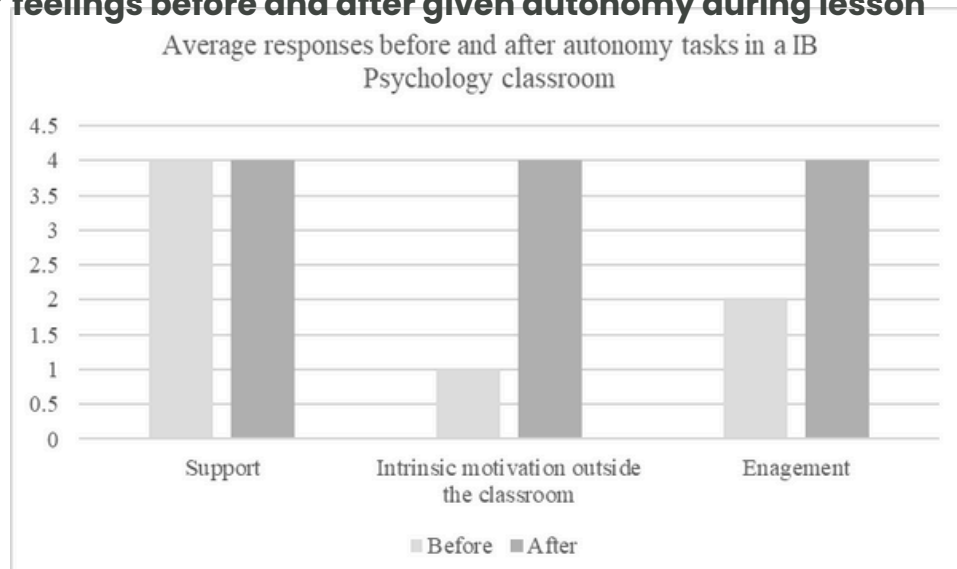
### Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed by calculating mean scores for autonomy support, intrinsic motivation, and engagement. Qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke’s approach to identify recurring themes related to motivation and challenges with autonomy. This mixed-methods analysis allows replication and comparison by others.

## Results

Quantitative findings show that students reported moderate levels of autonomy support (mean = 3.5) and slightly lower intrinsic motivation and academic engagement (both mean = 3.25) (see **Figure 1**). Highest-rated items included feeling that their opinions are valued in class discussions, enjoying class even when it’s challenging, and feeling supported—all scoring 4.0. Conversely, the lowest scores were for independently researching psychology topics outside of class (1.0) and having choices in how to complete assignments (2.0), indicating limited self-directed learning. However, after giving students autonomy over their learning, students’ scores regarding intrinsic motivation and engagement did improve, suggesting motivation can be significantly enhanced when learners feel a sense of control and ownership over their educational experience. This aligns with research emphasizing that autonomy supports deeper engagement and fosters a more meaningful connection to the material, ultimately promoting sustained motivation and better learning outcomes.

**Figure 1**  
**Students’ feelings before and after given autonomy during lesson**



**Table 1**  
**Results of Student Questionnaire on Autonomy support, intrinsic motivation, and engagement**

Statement	Average
I am given choices about how I complete my psychology assignments.	2
I feel like my opinions are valued in class discussions.	4
I have the freedom to explore topics that interest me in psychology.	2
My teacher explains <i>why</i> we are learning certain topics.	4
I learn psychology because I find it interesting.	4
I enjoy class even when it's challenging.	4
I would still want to learn psychology even if there were no grades.	3
I often look up psychology topics outside of class.	1
I try my best in psychology even when no one is watching.	3
I participate actively in class discussions.	4
I stay focused during psychology lessons.	2
I complete all my assignments on time.	3

Qualitative analysis revealed two primary themes (see **Table 2**):

- Motivational Benefits of Autonomy – Students expressed increased motivation and curiosity when given meaningful choices related to their interests, such as exploring current social trends like TikTok or applying psychological studies to real-world examples such as serial killers.
- Pitfalls of Excessive Freedom – Some students, particularly those with lower academic confidence, reported feeling overwhelmed by excessive freedom without clear guidance, leading to stress and disengagement. These findings underscore the need for structured autonomy that balances choice with support

**Table 2**  
**Key Themes on Motivation and challenges with autonomy**

Positive Effects of Autonomy	Challenges of Excessive Freedom
- Increased curiosity & motivation	- Feeling overwhelmed
- Meaningful choices linked to interests	- Stress and confusion without guidance
- Real-world connections enhance engagement	- Lower-confidence students struggle more

**Open ended questions: Do you enjoy the choice over how and what you learn in psychology?**

*"Yeah, I remember when we did that project on social influence, and our teacher let us pick our own case studies. I went with TikTok trends and how they influence behavior. It was super interesting because it felt relevant to me.*

*"It wasn't some old study, and I felt like I was actually learning something that mattered. When I have choices like that, I feel more motivated to work harder and contribute more in class."*

*"In our SIT lesson I connected it to influencers and how people just follow trends without really thinking about it. Being able to choose our own examples made everything feel more real. IB Psych can get pretty intense with all the theory and studies, but this way I could actually see how it connected to the real world. I ended up doing extra research because I was worried about it happening to me."*

*"When we learned about neuroplasticity, we got to pick which study to focus on for our presentation. I chose Draganski and since I'm into sports, it made sense. Being able to choose what I was looking at made me care more, instead of just memorizing some random study."*

*"In the abnormal unit, we could pick which disorder to research. I chose PTSD after watching a documentary about it. I didn't get bored or confused, and having that choice made me feel more in control sometimes I hate being told how to revise"*

*"When we started cognitive theories of emotion, I kind of wished we were just told which study to focus on. The freedom to choose seemed nice at first, but I ended up spending way too much time trying to decide, and I got confused about what you would expect."*

*"Honestly, there were times when I'd rather have just been told exactly what to do. There's already so much going on in IB with all the deadlines and assessments, and too much freedom just stressed me out more."*

*"When we had to pick our own theory for the abnormal psychology unit, it was just too overwhelming. IB Psych already has so much content, and making a choice on top of that just felt like extra work. I kept second-guessing myself, and it didn't do anything in the end".*

*"When we got to choose our own studies for the biological approach, it felt like I was just guessing what was important. I spent way more time looking for studies than actually learning them. It would've been so much easier if the teacher just told us which ones were most useful for the exams."*

## Discussion and Reflections

he findings highlight the tension between autonomy and structure. Autonomy-supportive strategies enhanced motivation and engagement but were most effective when paired with clear scaffolding, supporting the concept of structured autonomy (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Lower-achieving or less confident students struggled more with open-ended tasks, confirming research that autonomy without competence support can reduce engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Stefanou et al., 2004). Personally, this research has encouraged me to provide clearer guidance alongside choice, adapting autonomy to student readiness. The insights gained will help colleagues differentiate autonomy support and emphasize scaffolding in demanding curricula. Action research proved valuable for reflective practice and iterative improvement.

## Conclusion

Teacher support for autonomy positively influences intrinsic motivation and engagement in IB Psychology, when students feel the work is relevant and their choice they are more engaged. However, benefits are not straightforward, higher-achieving students thrive with choice, while lower-achieving students require structured autonomy with guidance to avoid confusion and stress. Effective autonomy support involves balancing freedom with competence-building scaffolding, particularly in challenging academic programs. Future practice should focus on differentiated autonomy to foster motivation and success for all learners.

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