The differential impact of teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) on academic progress: What role does autonomy support play?

**Research Questions**

RQ1: Are teachers more autonomy-supportive than TAs?

RQ2: What factors determine teachers’ and TAs’ autonomy-supportive behaviour?

**What was the focus?**

Note. Teachers/TAs.

**What was done?**

429 school staff (202 teachers, 227 TAs) from across the range of UK mainstream educational settings and one special school completed a questionnaire booklet comprised of four pre-existing measures and one new measure. Demographic information was also collected.

**Who conducted this research?**

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**What are the implications for EP Practice?**

1. EPs should support all teaching staff, but TAs in particular, to adopt an autonomy-supportive approach.

2. EPs should support school leaders to adopt practices that promote feelings of autonomy and competence among school staff. This could include helping school leaders to select or develop performance management systems that enhance the perceived competence of staff and to demonstrate a managerial style that is autonomy-supportive.

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**Research on TAs**

TAs now represent a quarter of the workforce in UK mainstream schools (Webster, Blatchford, & Russell, 2013). TAs have a direct pedagogical role, yet worryingly, a recent study found that the: “…pupils who received the most support from teaching assistants (TAs) had less engagement with a qualified teacher and were found to make significantly less academic progress than similar pupils who received less TA support.” (Webster et al., 2013, p. 78).

Part of Webster et al.’s (2013) explanation for the differential impact of teachers and TAs on academic progress focused on differences between teacher and TA talk. Specifically, they found that, linguistically and cognitively, TA talk would ‘close down’ students’ contributions whereas teacher talk saw them ‘open up’. An examination of the data on which this conclusion was drawn indicated that, on the basis of the definitions and instructional behaviours outlined by Reeve (2009), this distinction between teacher and TA talk could alternatively be seen as the difference between autonomy-supportive versus controlling interactional styles.

**Research on SDT and autonomy support**

In a review of research on the application of SDT to educational practice, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) demonstrated that the majority of this research focuses on the following two areas:

1. The positive relationship between autonomy motivation and a range of desirable academic and psychological outcomes for students.
2. Schools as social contexts that promote or thwart autonomous motivation.

With this in mind, research has examined how teachers, who represent a core element of the school social context, influence students’ autonomous motivation (Soenens, Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Dochy, & Goossens, 2012; Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007). Furthermore, with the positive relationship between autonomy-supportive teaching and autonomous motivation well-established, research has looked to identify what factors predict the extent to which teachers are autonomy-supportive (Pelletier, Sequin-Levesque, & Legault, 2002). This research has considered a range of motivational variables yet little attention has been given to the role of teachers’ perceived competence.

**What key terms does the reader need to know?**

**Self-determination theory (SDT):** A meta-theory of human motivation and personality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It posits that for people to flourish, three basic psychological needs must be met: 1. Autonomy: Behaviour is experienced as volitional and free from control (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). 2. Competence: Behaviour is experienced as effectively enacted (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). 3. Relatedness: Feeling connected to others by way of reciprocal love and care (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Autonomy support: An interpersonal style that promotes volition, interest and a sense of initiative in professional groups on individual subscales showed this difference to be accounted for by teachers scoring significantly higher for choice (r = .22), respect (r = .10) and controlling behaviour (when scores were reversed; r = .25). The difference in terms of relevance (r = .08) was not significant.

**Variance explained (see Figures 1 and 2)**

Teachers: Model explained 13% of variance in autonomy support and 66% in autonomous motivation for teaching. TAs: Model explained 2% of variance in autonomy support and 15% in autonomous motivation for teaching.

**Significant relationships between the variables**

Teachers: perceived competence → autonomy support

perceived competence → autonomous motivation constraints at work

TAs: perceived competence → autonomous motivation

**Note. **\( y = x \) was a significant predictor of \( y \).