

Applying Self-Determination Theory to Support Neurodiverse 18-Year-Olds: A Holistic Approach



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Abstract:

This short paper delves into the application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in aiding neurodiverse students, particularly those around 18 years old. It examines tailoring SDT's key components - autonomy, competence, and relatedness - to the unique requirements of these students, aiming to foster a more inclusive and effective educational landscape.

Introduction:

Self-Determination Theory, conceived by Deci and Ryan, highlights three essential psychological needs for motivation and personal growth: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For neurodiverse students transitioning to higher education or the workforce, catering to these needs is especially impactful.

Autonomy in Neurodiverse Students:

Providing autonomy to neurodiverse students, like those with ADHD or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is key to their educational success. Allowing them input in their learning methods and environment, as Smith et al. (2015) advocate, is crucial. This might mean offering varied coursework options, flexible deadlines, or different assessment methods.

SDT stresses the significance of motivations behind a student's actions, impacting learning outcomes. Motivations can be intrinsic, driven by personal enjoyment, or extrinsic, influenced by external factors. Recognising these motivations is vital, especially when a student's interest in a subject is not immediate but aligns with their personal identity and values.

Building Competence:

Neurodiverse students often possess exceptional skills in specific areas. Education should focus on enhancing these strengths while providing support for their challenges. Structured support and consistent positive feedback are essential in building a sense of accomplishment and capability, as Guay et al. (2004) demonstrated.

Fostering Relatedness:

Promoting a sense of community and belonging is critical in the educational journey of students. This involves creating educational settings that are welcoming and inclusive, providing social skills training, and establishing peer support networks. The importance of relatedness, as outlined by Ryan and Deci (2017), is in forming secure emotional connections and feeling integrated into groups.

Effectiveness of SDT-Based Interventions:

Many SDT-based programs have been implemented to aid struggling or at-risk students, as Burke et al. (2020) outlined. These programs, especially those promoting autonomy, have shown notable positive impacts across various ages, disabilities, and educational settings.

Empowering Young Adults:

As young adults transition to greater independence post-18, parents play a pivotal role. They should adjust their support to foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness, respecting their young adult's decision-making, acknowledging achievements, and maintaining open communication.

Conclusion:

Applying SDT to neurodiverse 18-year-olds necessitates understanding their unique expression of psychological needs. Educators and support staff should aim for flexible and inclusive learning environments that respect each student's strengths and challenges.

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