

## TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE OF AUTONOMY THROUGH THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH FROGASIA'S ADVOCATE PROGRAMME

Mohamed Nazry Bin Azmi<sup>a\*</sup>, Hadijah Binti Jaffri<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia*

\*Corresponding author [mnazryazmi@gmail.com](mailto:mnazryazmi@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

In 2016, FrogAsia set up the Advocate Programme to promote the usage of Frog VLE among teachers in the classroom across Malaysia. In an environment where most teacher professional development (PD) programmes are compulsory and linked to the government, the Advocate Programme somehow managed to gather teachers to maintain a learning community of teacher advocates without obvious enforcement by any authority figure. Grounded by the Self-Determination Theory, this study sought to explore the autonomy support the teachers' experience in their engagement with the Advocate Programme. A case study was conducted, where one-on-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with six Gold Advocate teachers to explore their experience of choices within their activities. Twelve supports were identified from the responses of the Gold Advocates. Of those, seven were considered to satisfy their autonomy needs. These seven supports were inferred to be the important factors behind the Gold Advocates' voluntary engagement with the programme. Teachers' experiences of autonomy are important for their motivation to engage in PD. Environments that support such experiences should be considered in the development and implementation of PD programmes.

Key words: Teacher professional development, Self-Determination Theory, Autonomy

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Advancement in technology has caused the world in this 21st century to change rapidly and become more interconnected. As such, our social, economy and cultural constructs are changing as well. In the face of these changes, the skills needed to sustain these changing constructs need to be updated. Such skills include transferable skills, critical thinking, and creative and innovative thinking. As such education systems have to be able to support the skills needed in the 21st century (UNESCO, 2016; P21, n.d). Malaysia joined the 21st century movement by reforming its education system, while at the same time keeping in line with its holistic educational philosophy. The 21<sup>st</sup> century student outcomes are documented in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2013).

To reach such 21st century student outcomes, a 21st century support system needs to be in place. Naturally, teachers need to be developed towards supporting these student outcomes. P21 sets out the criteria of teacher professional development (PD) in its Framework for 21st Century Learning, which includes (P21, n.d):

- Highlights ways for teachers to integrate 21st century skills, tools and teaching strategies into their classroom practice and help them identify current practices that could be changed
- Balances direct instruction with project-oriented methods
- Convey how deeper understanding of subject matter can actually enhance students' 21st century skills
- Helps teachers develop their abilities to use various strategies to address student diversity
- Encourages knowledge sharing within professional communities, using face-to-face, virtual and blended communications
- Uses a scalable and sustainable model of PD.

### Background of Problem

In 2016, FrogAsia, the service provider of the online learning platform, Frog VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), for all public schools in Malaysia, set up the Advocate Programme, a teacher learning community, to get teachers to learn, share and inspire each other in integrating Frog VLE and technology in their teaching and learning practice. The programme is joined on a voluntary basis. To be an Advocate, teachers have to attend a Frog Module Session organised by FrogAsia or other Advocates. These Advocates are awarded with statuses based on their level of involvement in the programme. Gold Advocates, the highest available status at the time of this study, are required to 1) attend Frog Module Sessions, 2) conduct one Frog Module Session every month with at least 5 participants, and 3) maintain

at least one active online community. As at the date of writing, there were 3,753 Silver Advocates and 1,009 Gold Advocates (FrogAsia. Sdn. Bhd., n.d).

Most teacher PD programmes in Malaysia are compulsory for teachers and are initiated by the government (OECD, 2009). The motivation for Malaysian teachers to engage in PD are usually extrinsic, e.g. enforcement by education authorities such as district offices, or to fulfill requirements for career promotion (Jamil, Razak, Raju, and Mohamed, 2007; Petras, Jamil, and Mohamed, 2012). However, extrinsically motivated behaviour to learning may lead to other unproductive behaviour such as passive compliance and is harder to sustain, for example, due to lack of perseverance (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995)

### **Problem Statement**

The Advocate Programme somehow managed to gather these teachers across Malaysia to, not only learn, but also maintain a learning community of teachers without enforcement by the Ministry of Education for the teachers to participate in this programme. This lack of significant extrinsic motivation, suggests that teachers who participate with the Advocate Programme do so voluntarily, which is a rare phenomenon in Malaysia. Has the lack of external controls on their choices driven them to engage actively in the programme? Or is this an extreme presumption? According to the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy is the most significant basic human psychological need, that when satisfied, acts as nutriment to one's *internalisation* of the values and regulation of an extrinsically motivated behavior. The experience of autonomy is also nutriment to sustain intrinsic motivation. Both internalised extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation are associated with productive behaviours and general wellbeing (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995). To understand this voluntary PD engagement phenomenon, a study is warranted.

## **2.0 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

Grounded by the SDT, this study sought to explore the autonomy supports the teachers' experience in their engagement with the Advocate Programme.

## **3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is grounded by the motivational theory of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995). SDT proposed that one's motivation to engage in certain behaviour ranges from autonomous motivation to controlled motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995). Autonomous motivation is when one's action is self-determined whereas controlled motivation is when one acts with a sense of control from a source other than itself. This is viewed in a form of a continuum as in Figure 1.

Intrinsic motivation is the truest form of autonomous motivation as the resulting behaviour is truly self-determined, i.e., simply out of enjoyment or interest (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995). However, extrinsic motivation varies in the autonomous-controlled continuum based on the degree to which the behaviour regulation and the associated values are internalised. *Internalisation* refers to the transformation of extrinsic motivation into personal values and, subsequently, the internalisation of behavioural regulations that were initially external (Ryan, 1995). The more the regulation and values of an extrinsically behaviour is internalised, the more autonomous the behaviour will be (Gagne & Deci, 2005). The process of internalising extrinsic motivation is marked by *external regulation*, *introjected regulation*, *identified regulation* and *integrated regulation* (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995).

*Externally regulated* behaviour is controlled externally from the effects of rewards and punishment. *Introjected regulation* is when the behavioural regulation has been taken in by a person but has not been accepted as his or her own. Introjected regulation has the influence of projecting self-worth and therefore, includes behaviour for the purpose of external approval. *Identified regulation* is when a person has accepted the behavioural regulation and value of a behaviour as personally important. However, this does not mean that regulating that behaviour comes fluidly or naturally as one has to consciously value the behaviour. *Integrated regulation* is the fullest internalisation of extrinsic motivation. The behavioural regulation and values are fully assimilated to the self (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995)

It must be noted that amotivation, at the very left of the continuum, is not within the scope of this study. Briefly, amotivation is the lacking of motivation at all (Ryan, 1995).

Intrinsic motivation and integrated extrinsic motivation are recognised by SDT as self-determined. People who are motivated as such are linked to enhanced performance, and greater persistence and creativity when engaging in an activity as compared to those whose motivations are less self-determined (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne & Ilardi, 1997). People have the natural tendency to do what they enjoy (hence, intrinsic motivation is self-determined) and to internalise the values and regulation of behaviour that makes them feel competent and socially accepted, but only to the extent that they perceive to have autonomy of the behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for autonomy is a need to perceive that one's behaviour is of his/her own choice (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995).

There are very few studies relating to teachers' motivation to engage in teacher communities. However, a study found that the autonomy needs of participating teachers are satisfied by the choices that they have to influence the activities in their teacher communities (Smart, 2016). The satisfaction of teachers' autonomy needs would lead to deep internalisation of the value and importance of what has been learned and increases the likelihood for them to implement the change in their practise (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Alterman, Vansteenkiste, Van Keer & Haerens, 2016)

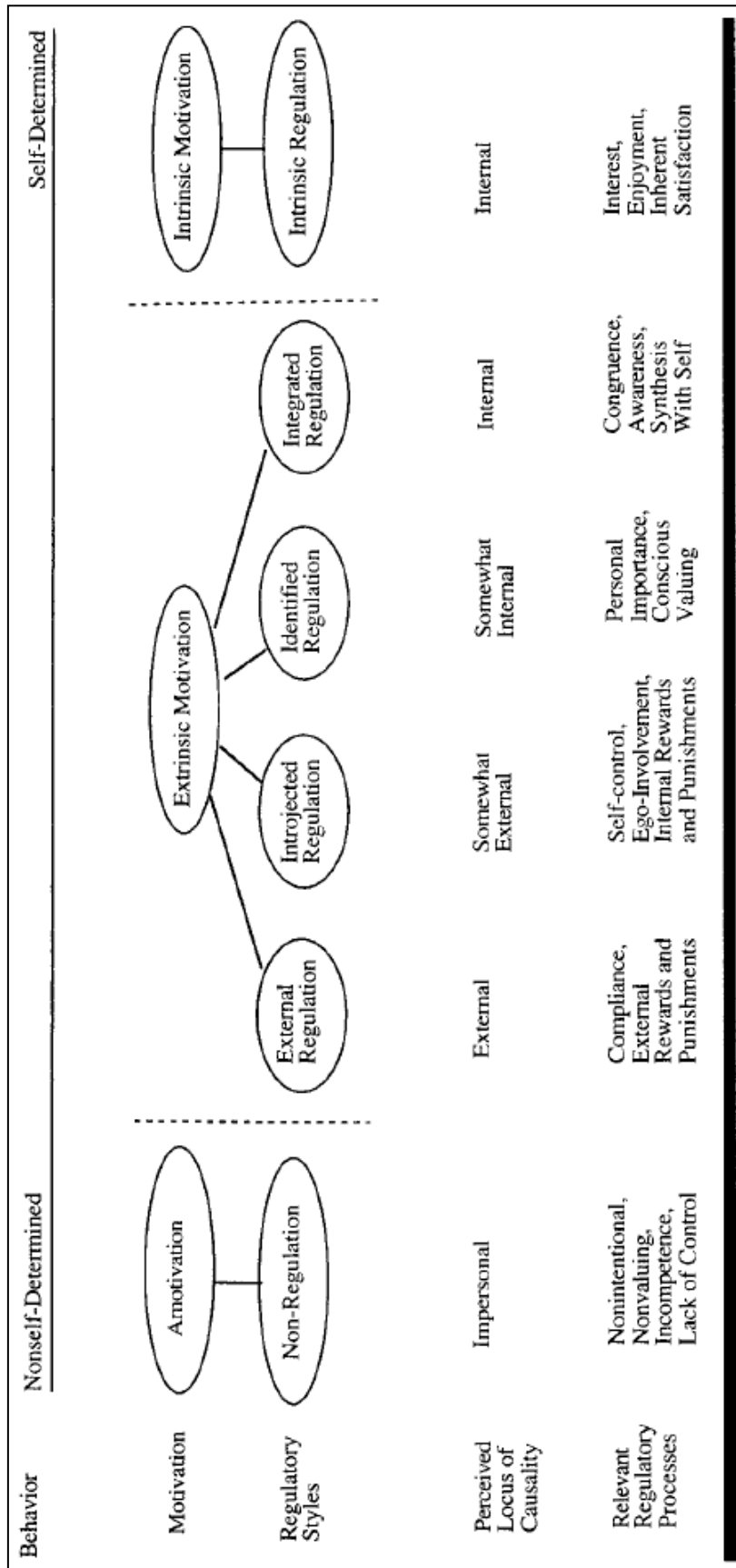


Figure 1: The Self-Determination Continuum Showing Types of Motivation with Their Regulatory Styles, Loci of Causality, and Corresponding Processes (Ryan and Deci, 2000)

#### ■4.0 METHODOLOGY

The holistic single-case study design was employed for this study (Yin, 2009). The critical case sampling approach is taken in which Gold Advocates were chosen as respondents with the proposition that they represent the group that have the highest level of voluntariness to be involved in the Advocate Programme (Patton, 1990). One-on one interviews were conducted to explore their experiences of choice (Creswell, 2008). Six respondents, all located in the district of Johor Bahru (JB), were gathered. The combination of the *general interview guide approach* (having a set of issues, as a guide, to be explored during the interview) and the *informal conversational interview* (coming up with questions naturally during the interview process without predetermined questions being made) were used in the interview for the interview (Patton, 1990). This is to ensure a systematic data collection process but yet maintaining the natural fluidity within a conversation. Questions revolve around respondents' activities as Gold Advocates and the freedom to make their own decisions in those activities. Ethical issues, and their preventive and remedial measures to be taken were planned out. Data were transcribed and analysed thematically using the *logic model* (Patton, 1990). Logic model involves "matching empirically observed events to theoretically predicted events" (Patton, 1990). In the case of this study, the analysis involved matching the data against the SDT.

#### ■5.0 FINDINGS

##### Supports

The participants reported twelve main supports that they experienced within their Advocate activities. The following Table 1 lists and describes those supports:

**Table 1: Main Supports Experienced by Participants**

Supports	Descriptions
Support 1 <i>Freedom to choose activities</i>	This is the ability to make decisions within their Advocate activities. These consist of ability to choose the learning events they want to attend as a learner or facilitate/conduct and the content that they want to use for those events that they conduct. Trust from school leadership also affects their perception of freedom to decide on their activities.
Support 2 <i>Positive feedback</i>	Feedbacks were typically received from the attendees of the learning events the Advocates conducted, within or outside of school, about the effectiveness of their training. Feedbacks were also experienced from students behaviour when the Advocates used the Frog VLE during class lessons.
Support 3 <i>School's ICT infrastructure</i>	Sufficient schools' ICT infrastructure was typically described as sufficient amount of functioning computer devices, and stable and fast internet connection.
Support 4 <i>Recognition from others</i>	Recognitions were reported coming from FrogAsia (in the form of certifications), school leadership and the Malaysian education authorities (mostly through the VLE KPI rankings of schools).
Support 5 <i>Teamwork</i>	Teamwork was reported as the combined efforts of working with the members of the fellow Gold Advocates within the district. They support each other in organising and facilitating VLE-learning sessions together.
Support 6 <i>Frog Modules</i>	Frog Modules are modules developed by FrogAsia to assist teachers to initiate the incorporation of Frog VLE into their teaching. It is made to be used by the Advocates in the Frog Module Sessions that they conduct [19]. The modules were described by participants as a good source of organised knowledge about Frog VLE usage. The modules support their own learning as well as their sharing with other teachers. Participants also reported that they could use the modules flexibly based on their own judgements without restrictions from the owner, FrogAsia.
Support 7 <i>Flexible teaching time</i>	Some of the respondents' school principals reduced their teaching time and set them with non-core subjects such as physical education so that they have room to execute their Advocate activities.
Support 8 <i>Guidance and resource support</i>	Guidance support refers to advice, counsel and direction received with regards to their Advocate activities. These were received from school leaders who are visionary and directly involved in advocating for VLE, and from a key district officer, overseeing the support for teachers implementing Frog VLE in the district. Supports include introducing them to FrogAsia's Advocate Programme and Modules, coordinating team of Advocates within the district, and providing resources (e.g., funds) and the network for their Advocate activities.
Support 9	As a figure of authority, some of the respondents' school principals back them up with their initiatives. According

<i>Leadership authority support</i>	to these respondents, such backing from the principal provided the push for other teachers in the school to learn and adopt Frog VLE in their lessons.
Support 10 <i>Morale support</i>	Morale support revolves around self-esteem support when one is feeling low or doubt in their competence. This was reported as the lending of ears and encouraging words from school leadership and the Guru Advokasi JB team.
Support 11 <i>Camaraderie and like-mindedness</i>	This support was reported as experience of fellowship, mutual support and common interests. Respondents described to have experienced this through being a part of the Advocate district team and the bigger network of Gold Advocates in Malaysia.
Support 12 <i>Sharing of knowledge</i>	This support is reported as the experience of the willingness of others to share information, experiences and solutions in regard to their Advocate activities. These were mostly experienced within the Advocate district team, where they shared through different avenues such as the social media. Some also reported experiencing such support from the bigger Gold Advocate community.

### *How the Supports Satisfy or Impede Satisfaction of the Need for Autonomy*

Autonomy is the belief that one's actions are the result of one's own will (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995). Support 1 *Freedom to choose activities* is a clear form of experiencing autonomy.

Increasing the choices or options for a person increases their sense of autonomy in an activity (Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin & Deci, 1978). The flexible nature of Support 6 *Frog Modules* transfers the control to the Advocates in deciding how to use them in the VLE-related learning events that they conduct.

To some participants, Support 3 *School's ICT infrastructure*, Support 7 *Flexible teaching time*, Support 8 *Guidance and resource support* and Support 9 *Leadership authority support* provided basic circumstances, without which would restrict the participants to exert control on their activities. For example, some participants reported that the lack of functioning computer devices (Support 3) and funds (Support 8) made it challenging for them to implement the use of Frog VLE in the school. Support 7 provides flexibility for the participants to decide on how to use their time to juggle the teaching and Advocate activities. Some participants reported feeling helpless when the school leadership themselves do not insist or enforce that the other teachers attend VLE workshops that they hold (Support 9).

To a certain extent Support 4 *Recognition from others*, especially the VLE KPI, functioned like a reward mechanism for the participants, which affect their activities. An extreme example is how one of the participants' activities are bounded by fulfilling the VLE KPI for the school. This takes the control away from the Advocate to an extrinsic factor, i.e. the VLE KPI.

## ■6.0 DISCUSSION

In Malaysia, the government has set up many incentives to encourage teachers to engage in PD programmes such as the raising of salary as a condition to joining PDs, publicising teacher achievements, certifications, and allowance for teaching critical subjects like English, Math and Science (Ministry of Education, 2013; Jamil, Razak, Raju & Mohamed, 2007). Yet, Malaysian teachers' participation in PD is considered one of the lowest in the world (OECD, 2009). Teachers attributed this to a lack of communication between teachers and authorities, work overload, and being the recipient of the formal PDs rather than contributors (Jamil, Razak, Raju & Mohamed, 2007; White, Lim & Chiew, 2005; Rashid, Abdul Rahman & Yunus, 2017; Ming, Murugaiah, Wah, Azman, Yean & Sim, 2010). Consequently, many formal PD programmes for teachers in Malaysia are perceived as not helpful for their day-to-day teaching practice (Petras, Jamil & Mohamed, 2012).

In contrast to the above, the findings of this study suggest that the Gold Advocates experience autonomy support in many forms. They are more involved in deciding when and how their PD would look like. This, in turn, may have provided them with the ability to improvise on how they could implement what they have learned through their engagement with the Advocate Programme.

The satisfaction of autonomy helps sustain intrinsic motivation and also the process of internalising values and behaviour of certain behaviours. Adult learners tend to see the need for learning when they perceive the object of learning is of value to their work, if they experience control over the learning, and if they think that the activity would reach their goals (Garrison, 1997; Thomson & Turner, 2013). In other words, if they have internalised the value and regulation of the behaviour (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995). It was also found that teachers who are of extremely autonomous motivation profile engages more often in professional learning activities as compared to those who are of externally regulated motivation profiles (Jansen in de Wal, den Brok, Hooijer, Martens & van den Beemt, 2014). This, perhaps, explains Gold Advocates' voluntary involvement with the Advocate Programme.

## ■7.0 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the different autonomy supports experienced by teachers in the Advocate Programme in order to understand their voluntary participation with the programme against the framework of SDT.

Twelve main supports were identified for the Gold Advocates, among which, seven satisfy their need for autonomy. Therefore, it is inferred that these supports are important factors to their voluntary participation with the programme.

However, only seven of the twelve supports identified contribute to the satisfaction of their need for autonomy. Support 2 *Positive feedback*, Support 5 *Teamwork*, Support 10 *Morale support*, Support 11 *Camaraderie and like-mindedness* and Support 12 *Sharing of knowledge* are out of the scope of this study. Therefore, it is suggested for future research to investigate into these supports to understand how they satisfy the other basic psychological needs proposed by SDT, i.e. competence and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan, 1995).

This study only explored the autonomy supports experienced by Gold Advocates. However, it was simply presumed that they do behave as what is expected by the criterias set by FrogAsia (refer Table 1). Therefore, it is suggested that future research look into the relationships between the Advocates' satisfaction of basic psychological needs and their specific behaviour within the Advocate Programme.

Additionally, since the study only sampled respondents located in Johor Bahru, it is suggested for future research to be done similarly but in different locations to understand if there are differences in their experiences.

This study can be a reference for policy makers and FrogAsia, as the developer of the Advocate programme, when developing PD programmes for teachers. Clearly, autonomy supports are important to be considered in teacher PD programmes in order to get teachers' participation.

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