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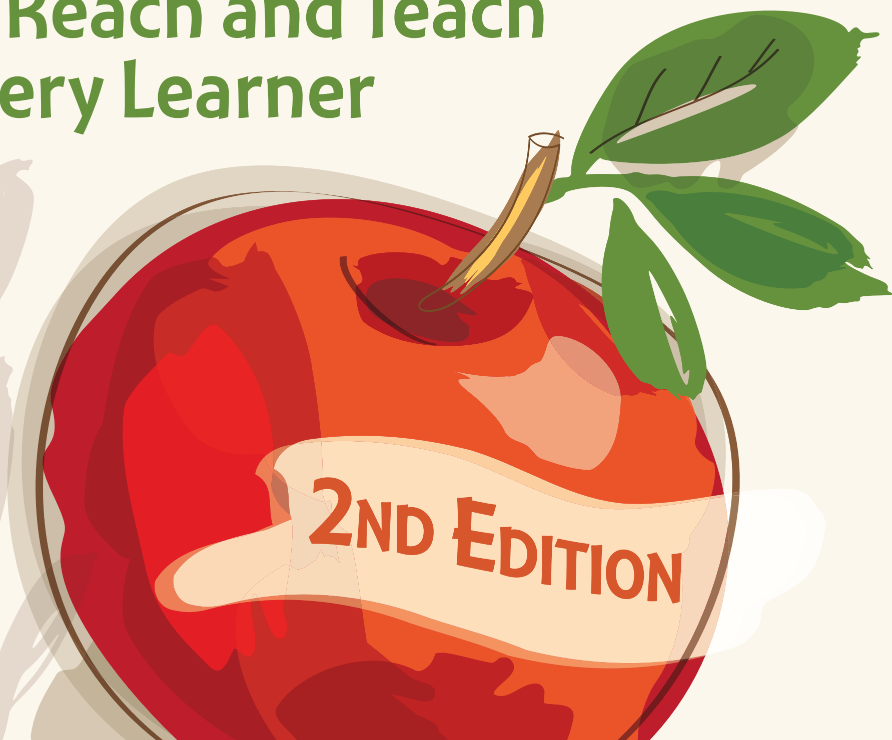
Jonathan C. Erwin

The Classroom of Choice

100+ Strategies to Reach and Teach Every Learner



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PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-4166-3309-9   ASCD product #124005   n10/24
PDF EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-4166-3310-5; see Books in Print for other formats.
Quantity discounts are available: email programteam@ascd.org or call 800-933-2723, ext. 5773, or 703-575-5773. For desk copies, go to www.ascd.org/deskcopy.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Erwin, Jonathan C., 1954- author.
Title: The classroom of choice : 100+ strategies to reach and teach every learner / Jonathan C. Erwin.
Description: Second edition. | Arlington, Virginia : ASCD, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024027902 (print) | LCCN 2024027903 (ebook) | ISBN 9781416633099 (paperback) | ISBN 9781416633105 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781416633112 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Classroom management. | Motivation in education.
Classification: LCC LB3013 .E73 2025 (print) | LCC LB3013 (ebook) | DDC 371.102/4—dc23/eng/20240626
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024027902
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024027903

33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

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2nd Edition

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Introduction

The first edition of *The Classroom of Choice* was published in 2004. It was important at the time of publication because it provided teachers with a fresh perspective on intrinsic motivation, offering an alternative to behaviorism, the belief that behavior is most effectively shaped through rewards and punishment, which was still the predominant psychological model used in schools and by teachers. *The Classroom of Choice* had a novel approach to student motivation and provided a number of useful tools. Interest grew because it gave teachers what they wanted: practical strategies, structures, and activities that create a learning environment characterized by safety and order, connectedness and inclusion, empowerment, autonomy, and fun.

After 12 years teaching high school English and 7 as a professional development specialist, the book's popularity allowed me to pursue my goal of becoming an independent educational consultant, working in schools throughout the United States and Canada, Australia, Germany, Ireland, Colombia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In my travels during those 20 years, I met hundreds of teachers and school leaders who had used my book and had the opportunity to talk with them about how they address the challenges they face and how they meet the needs of their students. Many of those strategies are in this edition.

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Why a Second Edition?

The changes that schools have undergone since the first edition, combined with the social and cultural shifts in society at large, provide a compelling rationale for a new edition that addresses many of the challenges educators face today:

- A startling increase in school violence.
- Significantly greater diversity among the student population.
- A dramatic rise in the number of English language learners.
- An increased awareness of the LGBTQ+ population.
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning and behavior.

What Has Changed in Schools in the Last 20 Years?

A Shocking Increase in School Violence

In 1999, the tragedy at Columbine High School shocked the nation. At that time school shootings were almost unheard of, and when *The Classroom of Choice* came out in 2004, school violence was not a top concern in K–12 education. The focus in education at that time was making American students more competitive internationally, particularly in reading and math. In recent years, however, the frequency and magnitude of school shootings have increased dramatically. The *Washington Post*'s database for school shootings shows that, since Columbine, "292,000 children at 310 schools" have experienced school shootings, "at least 157 children, educators, and other people have been killed in assaults, and another 356 have been injured" (Cox et al., 2024).

And it is getting worse. The 2021–22 school year was the worst on record, according to an *NBC News* article, which cites a report by

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Everytown for Gun Safety, a nonpartisan group advocating against gun violence: “between August 1, 2021 and May 31, 2022, there were 193 ‘incidents of gunfire’ on the grounds of preschools and K–12 schools” (Burke, 2022, para. 2).

Greater Diversity in the Student Population

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), between 2000 and 2010,

> White enrollment decreased from 61 percent to 52 percent of the total public school population. At the same time, the number of Hispanic students increased from 16 percent to 23 percent of total enrollment. This was a trend seen throughout the country over that time span, with schools in the South and the West seeing the largest Hispanic enrollment increases of any region. (Chen, 2023, para. 2)

NCES’s data show this trend has continued since 2010 “and will continue for the foreseeable future” (Chen, 2023, para. 3). Through the 2022–23 school year, projected graduation rates include

- An additional 16 percent decrease for white students.
- A 14 percent decrease for Black students.
- A 29 percent decrease for Native American and Alaskan Native students.

Conversely, according to the same study, other groups are expected to show significant growth in graduation rates, including

- A 23 percent increase for Asian and Pacific Island students.
- A 64 percent increase for Hispanic students.

English Language Learners

According to the government’s Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA, 2020), between school years 2000–2001 and 2016–2017, “the ELL population had grown [in the United States] by more than

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one million students to a total of 4,858,377, representing 9.6 percent of total student enrollment" (para. 1).

LGBTQ+ Students

There is no reliable data prior to 2016 on the number of students, ages 13–17, who identify as LGBTQ+. In 2016, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control released its national survey of high school students, called the "Youth Risk Behavior Survey," as it had for decades. That year, the survey included an important new question—asking students about their sexual orientation and gender identity.

While only 27 states agreed to include the question on the survey, there were "enough, researchers believe, to offer data that can be extrapolated to the rest of the country. That made it the first-ever national survey to parse high schoolers by sexuality" (Schlanger, 2017).

According to that survey, we learned "that some 1.3 million kids, or roughly 8 percent of all high school students in America, report being lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Schlanger, 2017).

A more recent study by UCLA School of Law's Williams Institute, finds that 1,994,000 students, ages 13–17, identify as LGBTQ+, which represents 9.5 percent of the population of youth ages 13–17 in the United States (Conron, 2020).

The Impact of the Pandemic

The current government research illuminates "the negative effect of the overall situation [during the pandemic] and the restrictions on students' mental and emotional well-being" (Reuter et al., 2021, para. 49):

- About 75 percent of respondents reported having "craved human interaction during the past six months."
- Over 50 percent said that their emotional and mental health had been negatively affected by the lack of social events or the switch to virtual learning.

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- About 66 percent "expressed that they felt less connected to their peers and less motivated in their studies" than in previous years.
- Over 50 percent selected "anxious, stressed, overwhelmed, disconnected, tired, and fatigued" as the words that described their emotional state during the pandemic.

According to one study, students were not the only group affected. As traumatizing as the pandemic was for them, for teachers, school leaders, and other educators, it "has led to decreases in teacher well-being" (Bintliff, 2020, p.1). Many of the educators I talk to express a high degree of anxiety, sleeplessness, stress, and hopelessness.

Social and Cultural Shifts

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Since 2004, there has been a significant shift away from behaviorism and toward theories of intrinsic motivation. While the research on the limits of behaviorism and the benefits of appealing to intrinsic motivation has existed for decades, schools were at first slow to abandon their reliance on reward systems and punishment. Books like Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards* and Daniel Pink's *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* have since drastically increased educators' awareness and interest in appealing to intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation.

Social-Emotional Learning

During the majority of time since *The Classroom of Choice* was published, federal and state departments of education have been focused on improving standardized test scores (primarily in reading and mathematics), but the last few years have seen a significant shift away from "academics only" education to a more whole-child-based approach, with an emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL).

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While not all of the states have adopted and published SEL state standards, 29 states already have, and most others are in the process of developing them.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides educators with an abundance of research stretching back more than 20 years that shares the positive impact of SEL on K–12 students. The Center for School Climate (CSC) shares its findings on the importance of paying attention to the affective domain—the school or classroom's social-emotional culture and climate.

Advancements in Technology

When the first edition came out, teachers were still using chalkboards, whiteboards, overhead projectors, and lots of paper. While most classrooms had a computer (or a few), there were virtually no laptops or tablets, and few teachers integrated higher technology into their teaching.

Now, many if not most students have their own laptops (or access to one), there are hundreds of educational applications, and, especially since the pandemic and remote learning, teachers have had to embrace new technology and learn to integrate it into their curriculum.

Conclusion

There have been tremendous changes in schools since 2004: an increasing number and frequency of school shootings, huge shifts in demographics and diversity, a higher number of ELL students, and an increase in the number of students identifying as LGBTQ+. While these changes themselves created many challenges for educators, they were exaggerated as we had to wrestle with them during a public health crisis. As a result, many students (and teachers) are experiencing mental and emotional issues, which can significantly affect students' health, their relationships, their behavior, and their learning.

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This book can help!

The second edition of *The Classroom of Choice* will provide teachers with updated research and dozens of practical, effective strategies (many new) that address preK–12 students' universal human needs to experience

- Safety, security, and order.
- Positive relationships and acceptance.
- Student voice and personal agency.
- Autonomy.
- Laughter, play, and fun.

By addressing these needs, teachers will tap into students' intrinsic motivation to learn both social-emotional skills and academic content, resulting in a safe, connected, empowered, and joyful classroom for all students and teachers.

Although primarily designed with teachers in mind, this book offers many useful management and instructional tips to anyone who works with young people: coaches, church youth group leaders, play directors, club advisors, and so forth. It provides hundreds of specific strategies you can use with young people to appeal to what intrinsically motivates them for high-quality learning to take place. It is about creating the classroom of choice.

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Laying the Foundation for a Classroom of Choice

Most educators understand the importance of the teacher–student relationship and how the quality of the relationship directly relates to learning. A true teacher–student relationship only exists when two conditions are met: (1) the teacher has the knowledge, skills, and desire to impart information and skills to their students, and (2) the students are interested in learning the knowledge and skills that are being offered. These conditions are most consistently met with preschoolers and graduate students. Between those school years, the second condition is less consistently present. To increase the frequency of those teachable moments, teachers need to focus on the manager–student relationship.

Whether you are a teacher, a coach, or in any position in which you work with young people, you are first and foremost a manager. Managing is first creating the conditions for students to be interested in learning or performing and then providing the structures, strategies, and activities that will encourage quality learning and quality performance. Teachers must manage the learning space, time, materials, technology, as well as students' mental, physical, and emotional states and, of course, behavior. To become an effective teacher, you must be an effective manager.

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Motivation and Trust

One of a manager's most important concerns is the motivation of workers or, for our purposes, students. Unmotivated students do poor work or no work, learn very little, and often behave in irresponsible or disruptive ways. Motivated students do quality work, learn well, and behave responsibly. There are two approaches to motivating students. One appeals to external motivation, which relies heavily on incentives or rewards (positive reinforcement) and consequences or punishment (negative reinforcement). The other approach appeals to internal motivation, which depends on motivation to come from needs or drives within students.

The Problems with External Motivation

External motivation, or behaviorism, was the state-of-the art psychological model of the early to mid-20th century. While the belief in behaviorism began to wane as early as the 1960s in the field of psychology, the rest of the world, including educators, continues to use it to this day. The widespread use of PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports), steeped in behaviorism, with an emphasis on reward systems, is proof that external motivation is still prevalent in schools.

Consider the many ways people try to make other people do what they want them to do. Whether it is a teacher trying to persuade a student to work, a parent trying to get a child to get ready for school, someone trying to talk their spouse into doing a household chore, a boss trying to get their employees to work harder, or one nation trying to force another nation to change a policy or ideology, you will see one or more of the following strategies being used:

- Asking: "Would you please do this?"
- Reasoning: "You should do this because. . . ."

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- Telling: "Just do it!"
- Rewarding (bribing): "If you do this, then you'll get that."
- Appealing to the relationship: "Do it for me."
- Negotiating: "If you do this, I'll do that."
- Tricking: "I'll bet you can't do it in the next five minutes."
- Reverse psychology: "Whatever you do, don't do it."
- Shaming: "I'm so disappointed in you. I thought you could do better than that."
- Nagging: "Have you done it yet? How about now? Now? Did you? Huh, huh?"
- Yelling: "I said *do it*!"
- Threatening: "Do it or else."
- Criticizing: "If you weren't so lazy, you'd do it."
- Imposing consequences: "Because you didn't do it, you will lose this privilege."
- Punishing: "Because you didn't choose to do it, you will have to . . ."
- Verbally attacking: "You are just lazy!"
- Humiliating: "Everyone, look at the blank expression on Leon's face."
- Physically intimidating: Invading personal space or pounding a fist on table.
- Physically forcing: Shoving, spanking.

One of the problems with these strategies is that none is guaranteed to work. If a student or anyone else has the mindset not to comply, there is nothing you can do to make them, except possibly using physical force. Unless safety is the issue, that strategy is illegal in most schools. Besides, the behavior we are most interested in is learning, and you can't physically force anyone to learn.

Another problem with these external motivators is that they actually prevent learning from taking place. Students already have an

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abundance of stress in their lives: issues at home, classwork, lunchtime, other students, fear about real or anticipated threats, fear of not getting a promised reward, and more. In *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (2005), Jensen explains the effects of threats on the brain. Perceived threats, which could include many of the external motivation strategies previously listed, from yelling to physical force, create conditions that many students regard as highly stressful. When students are feeling highly stressed, "thinking and memory are affected . . . the brain's short-term memory and ability to form long-term memories are inhibited" (p. 53). Feeling highly stressed, students' brains tend to go into the fight-or-flight response, which may manifest in school through all kinds of acting out or withdrawing behavior. Clearly, the "stick" approach to motivation is counterproductive.

What about the "carrot"? Surely rewards provide an incentive for students to behave appropriately and perform well? Contrary to conventional wisdom, and, unfortunately, common practice, rewards are no more effective in motivating students than threats and punishment. In fact, incentive programs such as behavior charts, pizza parties, and stickers actually do more harm than good. In their landmark meta-analysis of over 128 studies on the impact of rewards, researchers Deci and Ryan (1999) found that "engagement-contingent, completion-contingent, and performance-contingent rewards significantly undermined . . . intrinsic motivation . . . as did all rewards, all tangible rewards, and all expected rewards" (p. 628).

In *Tackling the Motivation Crisis* (2021), Anderson explains what the researchers found in simpler terms, sharing the many ways the "do this and you'll get that" approach to motivation fails. Reward systems decrease intrinsic motivation. When adults offer an incentive, it confuses students: "Without meaning to, when we use incentives, we may signal to students that good behavior or good work [is] not worth doing on [its] own" (p. 15). Thus, what we are doing when we offer a reward for learning or behaving responsibly, we unknowingly

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are "killing off the interest in the very thing we are bribing them to do" (Kohn, 2018 p. 72).

Another problem with reward systems is that there is "a sizable amount of evidence that incentives actually diminish learning and performance, just like they do intrinsic motivation" (Anderson, 2021, p. 15). This is true not only in schools but in the "real world" as well. In his book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (2011), Daniel Pink shares the results of dozens of replicated studies on the impact of incentive programs on worker productivity. Every case demonstrated the same results: higher incentives led to poorer performance.

Along with the negative effects on intrinsic motivation and learning and performance, external motivators tend to damage relationships and morale. "When we offer kids incentives for doing good work or behaving well, we may unintentionally signal to them that we don't trust them" (Anderson, 2021, p. 27), which negatively affects the relationship we are trying to build. Additionally, when a reward is withheld, it feels like a punishment. When my son was in kindergarten, his teacher kept a "nap chart" on the wall. Every day, if the kids slept during nap time, then they would get a sticker. (I'm not sure how she could tell the kids who were really sleeping from the ones who were faking.) Every year, in May, the class would walk to the nearby ice cream stand, and those who had the required number of stickers would get an ice cream cone. Sadly, my son at the age of 5 was no longer a napper. He was the only kid in the class who did not get an ice cream cone. He was still upset when I picked him up that day, and he still feels animosity toward that kindergarten teacher. Rewards punish! (We stopped for ice cream on the way home, by the way.)

Think of when you were last on the receiving end of any of the listed strategies, apart from asking. When we are feeling manipulated, either blatantly or subtly, the level of trust in the relationship

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is damaged. Subsequently, we are even less inclined to comply the next time that person tries to get us to do something. Therefore, the person trying to motivate us will intensify the external motivation by either increasing the reward or moving down the strategy list, from bribing to threatening or worse, further eroding the relationship. And positive, trusting relationships are crucial in schools.

Developing an optimal learning environment requires understanding the relationship between teachers and students. In their book *Trust in Schools*, Bryk and Schneider (2002) study the importance of social relationships to student learning and achievement. "Schools," state the authors, "are networks of sustained relationships. The social exchanges that occur and how participants infuse them with meaning are essential to a school's functioning" (p. xiv). In nationwide efforts to raise standards and improve student learning and achievement, trust is the key ingredient: "[A] broad base of trust across a school community lubricates much of a school's day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans" (p. 5).

Although *Trust in Schools* examines the importance of trust at all levels in a school system (teacher–teacher, teacher–principal, school–parents, and so on), the authors emphasize the importance of strong teacher–student trust: "Trusting student–teacher relationships are essential for learning" (p. 31). Bryk and Schneider also say that a school can have abundant resources and effective teaching programs in place, but student learning will suffer if trusting relationships are not part of the formula. Furthermore, according to them, "Given [the] power asymmetry in the student–teacher role set, the growth of trust depends primarily on teachers' initiatives" (pp. 31–32). This responsibility is greatest at the primary level and gradually decreases as students mature and become more responsible for their own learning. This does not mean, however, that at

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the secondary level students are on their own and that trusting relationships in the classroom are no longer important. Older students simply have a little more responsibility for the classroom environment than they did as kindergartners or 1st graders. The teacher still makes the difference in the classroom.

Let's examine the legacy of external motivation. An article published by the Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint summarizes recent research on the problems with behaviorism, stating,

> Rewards and consequences, even for children who have the capacity to meet expectations, are short-term solutions that do not solve the root causes for behaviors and create additional problems, including decreased internal motivation, loss of interest in activities that had been interesting, competition between students, [and] shame for students unable to meet expectations. (Tolley, 2021, para. 22)

Although coercive strategies, even "positive" ones such as rewarding, sometimes work for us in the short term, we must question the use of external control strategies, especially considering the research on the negative impact they have on learning, intrinsic motivation, and learning.

I don't suggest that teachers immediately and unconditionally abandon the use of all external motivators. That could lead to chaos, especially in classrooms of students who have come up through a system that embraced external control. My recommendation is to gradually reduce external control and to do it with discussion about what you are doing and why. If students have learned to love stickers, for example, you might move from giving stickers to them for appropriate behavior or excellent work to having them award themselves stickers as they think they have earned them. With discussion, these students will begin to see that it is not the sticker but their learning that is important.

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The Power of Intrinsic Motivation

The critical question, then, is how do we manage students' learning and behavior while minimizing coercion? Does that mean we adopt a laissez-faire, anything-goes teaching style? Not at all. The ideas in this book come from direct experience, not just from theory or clinical research. I know firsthand how students respond to a lack of structure, and it isn't pretty. What I am suggesting is that first we do all we can to appeal to what intrinsically motivates students. If that doesn't work, we can always return to the strategies we've used in the past. However, I am convinced that once you have experienced a class full of intrinsically motivated students, you will not want to go back. Applying the concepts of Choice Theory has been transformative for thousands of teachers throughout the world.

Universal Human Needs

As an educator, you will remember Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) from one of your undergraduate education courses (See Figure 1.1). Maslow was one of the first psychologists to propose that humans are intrinsically motivated by basic human needs. In his most important work, "A Theory of Human Motivation" (1943) in the *Psychological Review*, he posited that human motivation is based on a hierarchy of needs, from physical needs to those of safety, love, and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

Later, in the 1980s, two new theories of intrinsic motivation were developed simultaneously but separately: Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory and William Glasser's Choice Theory. Both theories are based on the assumption that all behavior is driven from within by universal human needs. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), steeped in decades of empirical research, posits three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Having

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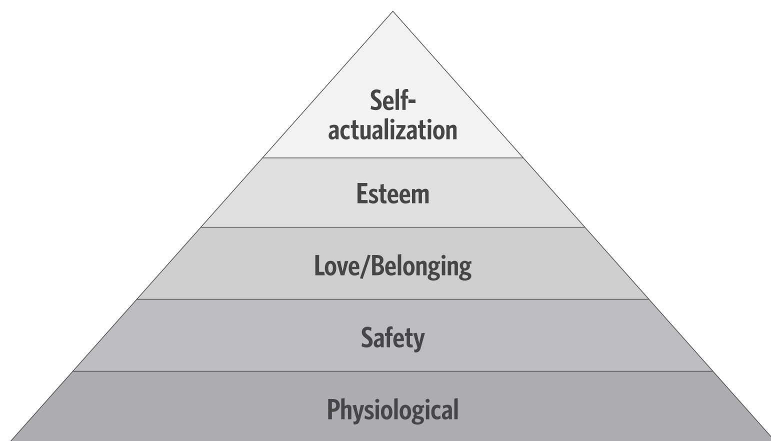
FIGURE 1.1
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



autonomy "refers to being the perceived origin or source of one's own behavior" (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 8). In other words, autonomy is feeling a sense of personal agency and having choices. *Competence*, according to SDT, "refers to feeling effective in one's ongoing interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one's capacities" (p. 7). And *relatedness* refers to "feeling connected to others, to caring for and being cared for by others, to have a sense of belonging, both with other individuals and with one's community" (p. 7). Maslow and SDT are similar, not only in the sense that they focus on intrinsic motivation but also because they identify similar needs, using different terms. Clearly, SDT's *relatedness* and Maslow's *love and belonging* refer to the same intrinsic needs. Similarly, SDT's need for *competence* aligns with Maslow's *esteem* need. And, while Maslow does not mention it specifically, *autonomy* is a prerequisite to achieving Maslow's

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highest aspiration, *self-actualization.* The main differences between SDT and Maslow are that SDT does not list the needs in a hierarchy, nor does it address the need for safety.

While I have a deep respect for the work of Maslow and Deci and Ryan (SDT), this book is based on Choice Theory, thus the title *The Classroom of Choice.*

The reason I chose Choice Theory 20 years ago and stand behind that choice today is that Choice Theory includes the three needs researched by Deci and Ryan (using different terms), addresses Maslow's need for safety and security, and adds one more need that is particularly important when working with students: the need for fun.

Freedom

Choice Theory's term for what SDT calls autonomy is *freedom.* The need for freedom does not require much explanation. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson referred to freedom as one of humankind's "inalienable rights." People, including students, are internally driven to be independent and to have autonomy—to control, as much as possible, the direction of our lives based on our individual needs and values. The need for freedom can be divided into two major types.

"Freedom to" involves having choices: freedom to go where you want, say what you want, associate with whom you want, pursue an interest or a career, and so on. We are most aware of the need for freedom when we perceive it as being threatened. Think of a time when you were pressured into doing something or going somewhere you didn't particularly want to. A good deal of the frustration you feel in a situation like that is your *freedom to* need tugging at you. Like all of us, students need to be able to make choices. In the interests of maintaining an orderly learning environment, providing choices does not mean students have license to do or say anything

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they want. In Chapter 6, we'll explore specific strategies that you can implement that provide students with dozens of ways of meeting their *freedom to* need in responsible ways.

Freedom from refers to freedom from things that cause us physical or emotional discomfort, such as fear, stress, disrespect, or monotony. In classrooms, much of the *freedom from* need is provided for if there is a safe, structured environment developed using management strategies such as those described in Chapter 2 about survival. Because this need includes freedom from boredom and monotony, Chapter 6 describes how to integrate novelty and spontaneity into your classroom routine. Doing so will enliven the classroom for everyone and boost your students' interest in learning.

Personal Power

Maslow's esteem and SDT's competence are outcomes of what Choice Theory terms the need for personal power. Unfortunately, for many, the word *power* has negative connotations. When I ask seminar participants who they think of when I say "power," I am frequently met with "Hitler" or "Stalin," people famous for abusing power. That's not the kind of power Choice Theory means.

In Choice Theory terms, the concept of power takes on a much broader, more positive meaning. People behave in two general ways when they attempt to meet their need for power.

Exercising one's influence over something or someone is *power over*. This is the closest to the common perception of the word *power*. A sculptor exercises power over her medium. The guitarist demonstrates power over his instrument. A mechanic exhibits power over an engine. These are examples of using power over inanimate objects, all positive. It is when people use or abuse power over other people that we see power in a negative light: the military junta hurried to exert its power over the nation; the chief executive officer abused

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the benefits of money and power; the principal used their positional power to intimidate the staff. In each of these cases, someone is using power in an irresponsible way.

Many use their influence with others for the greater good: Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mother Teresa, to name a few. *Power over* is not, by definition, bad. *Power over* only becomes destructive if one is using power irresponsibly, depriving others of meeting their basic needs.

People meet the need for *power within* when developing the knowledge and skills that increase the quality of our lives. Gaining *power within* includes learning, achieving success, and enjoying the feeling of self-worth that comes with personal growth. Without the need for the *power within*, human beings would never have developed the culturally and technologically sophisticated world we live in today. Something innate in human beings drives us to set goals, to achieve them, to improve upon what others have done before us, and to creatively adapt to new situations—the need for *power within*.

If you put in the following blank, "I want to be good at ___," all the behaviors you fill in the blank are ways that you use to meet your power need. For example, you might have listed teaching, parenting, being a friend, listening, coaching soccer, gardening, or playing piano. Helping students gain power is the reason schools exist. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 share dozens of ways of addressing the need for power in the classroom.

Love and Belonging

All three theories of intrinsic motivation include this need. While SDT calls it relatedness, both Glasser and Maslow refer to it as the need for love and belonging. Humans, like many other species, are social creatures. We live in family units, work on teams, form social and civic organizations, attend social gatherings, and engage

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in hundreds of other behaviors that help us connect and interrelate with others. Almost all human endeavors have some social dimension to them. Having a strong need for love and belonging is one of the reasons the human species has been so successful. In our primitive past, humans' urge to belong to a group manifested itself in cooperative hunting, gathering, childcare, and defense of the group, behaviors that were essential to the last need we'll discuss: survival.

We've known about the importance of positive social connections for decades. In his book *Love & Survival,* author and cardiologist Dean Ornish (1999) shows the lifelong connection between the quality of our relationships and our physical and mental well-being. Citing hundreds of studies, Ornish says about the power of love and belonging:

> I am not aware of any other factor in medicine—not diet, not smoking, not exercise, not stress, not genetics, not drugs, not surgery—that has a greater impact on the quality of life, incidence of illness, and premature death from all causes. (pp. 2–3)

In *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness,* Waldinger and Schultz (2023) find that "study after study, including our own, continues to reinforce the connection between good relationships and health, regardless of a person's location, age, ethnicity, or background" (p. 47).

For children and adolescents, positive social interactions are especially important. A recent article in *Psychology Today* asserts that, while most "people seek out and desire strong social bonds . . . for adolescents and children, such bonds are critical to healthy development" (Allen, 2022, para. 5). School shutdowns and remote learning during the pandemic made it difficult to impossible for students to develop or maintain these critical relationships. This "[s]ocial isolation and being away from peers greatly affects a child's mental health,

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which respectively, will affect their ability to learn and retain knowledge" (Taylor, 2020). A recent Reuters survey of K–12 schools found that "74% reported multiple indicators of increased mental health stresses among students. More than half reported rises in mental health referrals and counseling . . . [and that the] lack of in person education was a driver of these warning signs" (Lesser et al., 2021).

Back in the traditional "don't smile until Thanksgiving" days of classroom management, the relationship between students and teachers was simple: it was not important if students liked or trusted their teachers as long as they respected or even feared them. We know better now. The studies cited in this chapter support the principle that the deep-seated urge to love and belong—to connect with others, to cooperate, and to give and receive affection—is truly a basic need with a profound influence on our overall physical and mental wellness, explaining the importance of relationships in schools for student learning and achievement. Chapter 3 discusses the role this need plays in learning and describes specific strategies teachers can use to help them build those essential relationships with and among their students.

While SDT and Choice Theory align in terms of the needs for autonomy (freedom), competence (power), and relatedness (love and belonging), Glasser includes two more needs that are particularly significant in the classroom: the need for fun and play and the need for survival.

Fun and Play

Try to imagine life without enjoyment, laughter, or pleasure. Don't dwell on it; it is too depressing. Humans need to have fun, to play! Maybe SDT and Maslow didn't include fun as a universal human need because humans are not the only species that engage in play. However, play is "often assumed to be the domain of humans. . . .

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But the fact that play is widespread across the animal kingdom shouldn't be a shock" (Hooper, 2023, para. 15). Anyone who has ever owned a cat or dog has seen them play; hamsters love their wheels, and rats giggle when they are tickled. Play, or the need for fun, is seen in everything from mammals to insects, and most researchers agree it is linked with learning skills that they will need as adults—to survive, to hunt, to parent, and so on (Hooper, 2023).

The need for fun has particular significance to us as teachers. Glasser (1998) relates fun to learning: "Fun is the genetic reward for learning. We are descended from people who learned more or better than others. The learning gave these people a survival advantage, and the need for fun became built into our genes" (p. 41).

When children and adolescents play, they are laughing and having fun, but play also helps them develop cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally (Sessoms, 2017). Summarizing the research on the benefits of fun and play, Sessoms writes, "Play develops cognitive skills when children have to think and remember processes and rules. [And through play] children develop language skills and learn about the world and how it works" (p. 1).

Play also helps kids develop physically, improving strength and stamina, and helps develop gross and fine motor skills. Additionally, while children are playing with others they develop emotionally; they learn how to get along, how to negotiate, how to share, and "children begin to develop characteristics such as kindness, empathy and self-control" (Sessoms, 2017, p. 2). Emotionally, when kids play, they form positive bonds with others and their stress levels are reduced. And while kids "learn to succeed through play, they also learn how to react to disappointment" (Sessoms, 2017, p. 2). Play, then, seems essential to the growth and well-being of children, and this book will treat it, as Glasser does, as a universal human need.

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While play is not only essential for our cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development and for our physical and emotional well-being, it is also a wonderful tool for building relationships. "It takes a lot of effort to get along well with each other, and the best way to begin to do so is to have some fun learning together. Laughing and learning are the foundation of all successful long-term relationships" (Glasser, 1998, p. 41). While many of the strategies in this book are fun, Chapter 7 specifies dozens of ways of rejuvenating the classroom with productive play.

Survival

While SDT focuses solely on psychological needs, Maslow's hierarchy and Glasser's Choice Theory include physiological needs as well. The physiological need to survive is often the first thing that comes to mind when we discuss basic needs. Survival includes the obvious needs for food, shelter, physical comfort, and safety. To meet this need, we sleep, wear clothing, seek shelter, and so on. However, because human beings are able to imagine the future, they do much more than attend to their immediate physical needs. People also think about their future security and physical health. They keep savings accounts, buy insurance, or invest in the stock market, bonds, and real estate. Some people exercise and eat healthily. They plan for a comfortable retirement. Some invest in home security systems.

Therefore, the need to survive, though primarily physical, has a psychological component: our need for a sense of security in the future. In classrooms, especially today, after the trauma of the pandemic and the shocking increase in school violence, students need to feel physically and emotionally safe and secure. Chapter 2 addresses specific ways teachers can help their students see the classroom as a safe, orderly learning community.

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Important Characteristics of the Five Basic Human Needs

A teacher's understanding of the basic needs has the potential to transform a classroom. It is important to understand not only what the needs are but also certain characteristics of the needs that have significant implications for classroom instruction and management. After an explanation of these characteristics, we will discuss their significance to the classroom.

First, the needs are innate. Another term for *basic human needs* would be *genetic instructions*. Just as other species have behavioral instructions as part of their genetic makeup, so do humans. Many species have specific genetic instructions: Canada geese are genetically instructed to migrate to the Chesapeake Bay; bears, to hibernate; and newly hatched sea turtles are instructed to dig out of the sand, get to the water, and start swimming. Other species are given genetic instructions also, but because of their more highly developed brains, the instructions are more general. The individual can use their intelligence to choose from a number of behaviors that will meet the instructions (or needs). Because of our well-developed cerebral cortex, humans' genes are not shouting instructions like "Fly south!" or "Go to sleep!" or "Swim!" Our genes are whispering things such as "Be physically comfortable and safe," "Connect with others," "Gain personal power," "Be free," and "Be playful!" We have free will in how we choose to behave or not behave in following these genetic instructions.

One thing is not a choice, however. Just as it is not a choice for a Canada goose to feel the urge to fly south in November, it is not a choice for human beings to feel the urge to survive, love and belong, gain power, be free, or have fun. These needs are in our genes.

Second and third, the basic needs are universal, and people have the needs in varying degrees. In other words, although all human

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beings have all five needs, each of us does not experience the same amount of drive for each need. For example, one person might have a high need for love and belonging, with varying degrees for power, freedom, fun, and survival. That person's behavior would probably look different from the behavior of someone else who might have a high need for power and freedom, a moderate need for fun and survival, and a low need for love and belonging. The former might spend a great deal of time and energy on relationships, both in their personal life and at work. They might attend social events, join clubs and civic associations, enjoy close relationships with friends and family, and enjoy their favorite activities most often in the company of others. The person with the higher need for power and freedom needs might spend more time alone, working on projects, reading, attending courses, competing in athletics, constantly learning and achieving. They may have a few close friends but may not spend as much time with them as the former person spends with theirs.

In Choice Theory terms, each person has different *needs-profile*s. A person's needs-profile, the relative quantities of the five basic needs by which an individual is genetically motivated, does not dictate a person's behavior; but it is a powerful influence. These examples are not necessarily the way individuals with high love and belonging or power needs behave. They are simply ways two individuals might manifest their particular needs profiles. Think about your own needs profile. If you were to list your needs in order from most important to least important according to their influence on your behavior, how would you order them?

Fourth, the ways you meet your basic needs might make it difficult for other people to meet theirs. If, for example, a store manager has a high need for power and meets that need by frequently exerting what authority they have, they might easily come into conflict with an employee with a high freedom need. A classroom of students

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with a high need for fun and freedom might end up in trouble with a teacher who has a high survival need (order and security). I'd like to stress that in each of those cases, the individuals involved might come into conflict. It is not inevitable. People attempting to meet their different needs (or even the same need) in the same environment don't necessarily end up at odds. One of the main purposes of this book is to describe how to create the conditions in a classroom so that teachers and students can meet their needs effectively without coming into conflict.

Responsible and Effective Behavior

Although all behavior has a purpose—to meet one or more of our basic human needs, all behavior is not necessarily effective or responsible. The term *effective behavior* refers to a behavior that works for us; it satisfies our needs. The term *responsible behavior* refers to behavior that satisfies our needs without depriving others of meeting theirs. Unfortunately, not everyone chooses effective and responsible behaviors all the time. A student who calls out answers out of turn may be effectively meeting their power need, but they are depriving other students and the teacher of meeting theirs. The class clown may find that disrupting the class helps them meet their power, freedom, and fun needs; but again their behavior is depriving others (particularly the teacher) of meeting their needs effectively. The good news is that people can, and most are more than willing to, choose new, responsible behaviors if they are at least as needs-satisfying as their former, irresponsible behaviors. Chapters 2 through 7 discuss how to manage a classroom so that students are more likely to make responsible choices.

Implications for the Classroom

An understanding of the five universal human needs provides a solid foundation for creating and managing a high-quality learning environment and can help develop behavior management strategies

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that don't rely on time-consuming, ineffective extrinsic motivational practices. Students' genetic instructions are to seek a safe, orderly environment (survival), feel a sense of belonging, be successful and have a sense of importance (power), experience a sense of independence, and have fun. If we do not provide opportunities for students to meet these needs in our classrooms, the genetic instructions don't go away. Students will be frustrated. Some frustrated students will behave responsibly and just wait until they are home or at lunch to satisfy their unmet needs. Many others have not developed that much self-control and engage in irresponsible behaviors in their attempt to follow their genetic instructions. These irresponsible behaviors take on a million different faces. If you've been in any classroom, you've seen them, and I'm sure you'd agree that none of them add to the quality of the learning environment. These behaviors drive many teachers out of the profession and create conditions for undue stress for the rest. Using effective teaching and managing strategies that provide students with opportunities to follow their genetic instructions responsibly prevents students from using disruptive behavior to meet their needs and turns the classroom into a joyful learning environment.

Just as each individual has a unique needs profile, so does each class, which may have an effect on the way you instruct and manage. More often, however, your classes will be composed of students with a wide assortment of needs profiles. Therefore, using a balance of needs-satisfying strategies will mean that everyone can get what they need at least part of the time. Remember that, even in classes that lean strongly toward one need, the students in those classes have all five, so you can't completely ignore the other needs.

Imagine a workplace where you enjoy strong relationships with your supervisor and colleagues, feel like you are a successful contributing member of the organization, enjoy a sense of autonomy, are encouraged to learn and play, and are provided with a salary

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that is sufficient and fair. Wouldn't that be a place where you'd be committed to doing quality work? It's the same for students. Providing students with a needs-satisfying learning environment not only prevents irresponsible behavior, but it also encourages students to be engaged in quality learning by appealing to what intrinsically motivates human beings.

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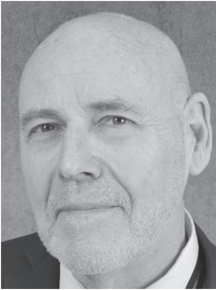
About the Author



Jonathan C. Erwin, MA, has enjoyed over 35 years in education as a secondary English teacher, professional development specialist, author, and independent consultant. Early in his teaching career, Jon attended training in Glasser's Choice Theory, learning the importance of appealing to intrinsic motivation rather than using the carrot-and-stick approach. When he put this theory into practice in his classroom, the results exceeded his expectations: attendance increased, behavior improved, student engagement increased, and student learning and achievement soared. As Jon continued his study of intrinsic motivation, he was asked by his district to conduct in-service training for the faculty. Enjoying the experience of working with other educators, he then moved into the role of professional development specialist at the nearby Board of Cooperative Educational Services, during which time he wrote the first edition of this book. Soon after its publication in 2004, Jon conducted professional learning workshops and seminars for educators in 44 states, 5 Canadian provinces, as well as in Ireland, Germany, Colombia, and Australia, helping teachers create needs-satisfying learning environments and teach in engaging student-centered ways.

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