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## **Super Dville Curriculum and the Facilitation of Social Emotional Learning and Intrinsic Motivation.**

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**Abstract:** SuperDville is a video-based SEL curriculum created to empower elementary and middle school students with learning disabilities. In this paper, we discuss how SuperDville curriculum can enhance social emotional learning experiences for middle schoolers. We also discuss how SuperDville can facilitate intrinsic motivation in students with disabilities, by highlighting tenets of Deci & Ryan's (1985) Cognitive Evaluation Theory. Through the extensive video modeling and paired curriculum SuperDville provides, students witness not only examples of positive social behavior, but also scenarios focused on resolving conflict, acknowledging different abilities, and dealing with difficult feelings and emotions.

**Keywords:** Learning Disabilities, Social Emotional Learning, Curriculum, Intrinsic Motivation, Cognitive Evaluation Theory



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## **Introduction to Super D'Ville**

SuperDville ([superdville.com](http://superdville.com)) is a video-based social and emotional (SEL) curriculum created to empower 7-13 year olds who learn differently. Through short, realistic videos with child and teen actors, students of all abilities can work through important social emotional concepts such as

self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These core concepts are based upon the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework of social emotional learning (SEL), which is dedicated to making SEL part of a high quality and equitable education for all (CASEL, 2023). A subscription to the SuperDville site allows classroom access to videos, lesson plans, and curriculum-based activities.

Educators know that social-emotional skills may not come naturally, and need to be explored and practiced. Video modeling can be an effective and evidence-based way to practice social-emotional skills. According to Schmidt (2021), video modeling is defined as using video or film to teach or reflect upon a practice or learning, and can be a helpful strategy for students of all grade levels and abilities. Through video, students better understand empathy, can practice reading facial expressions, and observe the processing of social cues and the emotions of others. Understanding these important visual-based indicators can assist all students, but especially neurodiverse students and/or those with learning disabilities, in strengthening relationships with others and becoming part of a classroom community. In addition, viewing different social



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emotional scenarios via video with a teacher or facilitator allows time and space for students to discuss issues and increase self-awareness, enhancing thoughtful, paced processing of feelings and emotions.

### **The Process**

We, at the Hunter College School of Education, have been involved in working with SuperDville to provide lesson plans and curriculum to complement a set of videos for students in late elementary school and middle school, focusing on self-advocacy, relationship skills, identifying emotions, focus, and confidence. Specifically, second year teacher candidates in the adolescent special education program, along with faculty and staff advisors, collaborated with Super Dville staff – attending and participating in focus groups, reading through existing scripts, giving feedback, and creating curriculum for select episodes. Adjunct faculty and field supervisors within the Hunter College School of Education also contributed by sharing their thoughts and ideas within focus groups and broader meetings. The experience was enlightening for all parties, and being able to see the final project in the form of short videos, lesson plans, and curriculum that will be used in schools across the United States was truly powerful.

### **The Experience of Middle School Students**

The middle school grades have been widely regarded as a difficult period for students due to peer pressure, hormonal changes, and increased bullying (Lantos & Halpern, 2015), usually by older



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students or students viewed as having more social currency. The middle school experience is also associated with a decline in academic motivation and achievement (Goldstein, Boxer, & Rudolph, 2015), and a time when students may have less empathy for others because there is so much going on within themselves (Ma, Ma, Wang & Lan, 2019). Additionally, middle school is a time of transition in environment, as starting in 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, most students go from having one teacher and one classroom space to multiple teachers in multiple classroom spaces. Within Hunter College School of Education focus groups, top issues surrounding middle schoolers coincided with recent research, and included concerns with bullying, peer approval, conflict resolution and identity formation.

### **The Power of Peers**

Within late elementary/early middle school, peers play a big role in a student's life. As one focus group member stated, "students are so connected to their peers and to their peer's emotions. When one student gets ramped up, it leads all others to follow." This is helpful in the sense that some students really do view their classroom as a community, but less helpful in that lots of bullying can occur if a student isn't in the "in-group" (and this sometimes leaves out students who are different in any way). Bullying not only happens in-person, but also online within social media channels, and this greatly affects the classroom the next day. What is helpful, according to another focus group member, is "having activities and experiences where students have to listen together and then do something together." It is not the cure for bullying or peer pressure, but it



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allows for a safe and teacher-supported space where students can navigate ideas and emotions with peers (SuperDville Focus Group, December 2022).

### **How SuperDville Curriculum Enhances SEL Experiences for Middle Schoolers**

The SuperDville curriculum was created to provide students with video, lesson plans, and project-based curriculum, so that students and teachers can have experiences together that center on social-emotional learning. For example, in an episode focused on confidence, a boy named Alex enters a student-run news studio, and observes everyone working well together and confident within their roles in the newsroom. Alex watches this group closely, but feels a lack of confidence in himself. Alex tries to sneak out of the situation, but the other students support him in identifying his own unique strengths as a young journalist.

After watching this short video, students are asked to discuss:

- What are some accomplishments or achievements that make you proud?
- What are some accomplishments or achievements you can recognize in your classmates?

As part of the activity for this episode, students create a “Certificate of Achievement” for themselves, either by hand or digitally. Then, students share their achievements with classmates through a gallery walk, partner share, or a short presentation. Questions for further reflection involve students thinking about their strengths and weaknesses, and the importance of being



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aware of both. Students can then freely discuss ways they feel confident, as well as things that may be challenging for them, with a teacher facilitating the discussion.

### **Super Dville and Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation**

Episodes like these not only highlight elements of CASEL's Framework for Social and Emotional learning, but also can be important tools for enhancing a student's intrinsic motivation. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsic motivation is an innate concept. It is

an energy orientation, a display of the positive attributes of humanity which include curiosity, vitality, and self-determination. Intrinsic motivation is especially important to facilitate in students with learning disabilities, who may be feeling less than motivated academically because of the struggle they have always felt with specific academic subjects. However, if teachers can facilitate intrinsic motivation within their students, it does so much to eliminate learned helplessness and create a positive classroom culture. Intrinsic motivation creates a different forum for learning. Instead of learning for the grade or recognition (or lack of a "good" grade or academic recognition), students begin to learn because they want to. Intrinsic motivation also creates a space for students to be more accepting of themselves and others. The concept of intrinsic motivation can be understood within the framework of Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self Determination Theory (SDT).



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Although researchers point to intrinsic motivation as an inherent quality, the maintenance and enhancement of this motivation is dependent on the social and environmental conditions surrounding the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan's Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) addresses the social and environmental factors that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation and points to three significant psychological needs that must be present in the individual in order to foster self-motivation. These needs are competence, autonomy, and relatedness (1985).

### **Competence**

According to Deci and Ryan (1985), a sense of competence comes from success experiences and overall positive feelings about an activity. Competence is often intertwined with the concept of optimal challenge. Children, by nature, are driven by a need for competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This need for competence is also seen in a variety of lifespan theories, including Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development (1994). According to Erikson, during the school years (especially between the ages of 7-12), the basic life conflict is Industry vs. Inferiority. A child's work is school. When they succeed, they feel a sense of competence, or industry. If they struggle (such as when a child has a learning disability), inferiority reigns. In the SuperDville episode described above, the video and associated lesson all focus on the need for confidence, or a feeling of achievement (even when Alex, the main character, feels that he is not good at anything). By extending the video's lesson to students' personal feelings of accomplishment, a teacher is facilitating a sense of competence in students. A sense of



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competence and the ability to take on optimal challenges all foster the development of intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

### **Autonomy and Self Advocacy**

For intrinsic motivation to flourish, a sense of competence must be accompanied by a sense of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and parents, peers, and teachers can support autonomy in many ways. By providing choice, and being responsive to thoughts, questions, and ideas, a teacher can give students a feeling of autonomy support (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Deci, Schwartz,

Sheinman, & Ryan (1981) spent several years observing the difference between autonomy supportive versus control-orientated educators. In this classic study, teachers who were autonomy supportive had a more positive impact on their students than those who were control orientated. Statistically significant differences demonstrated that students of autonomy supportive teachers were seen as more self-directed and intrinsically motivated to learn, and also exhibited high levels of self-esteem.

In a SuperDville episode focused on self-advocacy and autonomy, a girl named Lily shares with her peers that she was unable to perform in a talent show because she feels overwhelmed with all of the schoolwork she has to complete. Her peers suggest that she talk with her teacher to see if the teacher can do anything to make things a bit more manageable. One of Lily's friends, Juniper, even suggests that Lily write down the things she is good at as well as the things she



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struggles with, to share with her teacher. By the end of the clip, Lily shares with her peers that she took the initiative to speak with her teacher, who suggested the use of audio books to make assignments less painful for her. With all the time she now saves on homework, Lily can now do more of what she loves - making art! According to Cognitive Evaluation Theory, when an individual is given a sense of choice, an acknowledgement of feelings, or an opportunity for self-direction, feelings of intrinsic motivation are enhanced (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Most developmental theorists see autonomy as an important part of early adolescence (Murphy, et al., 2008). Ratelle, Guay, Vallerand, Larose, and Senecal (2007) demonstrated how important autonomy is as a child grows into a teenager. In their study, high school students who were more autonomous in their academic work tended to be more dedicated to their education. Williams, Hedberg, Cox, and Deci (2000) performed two studies examining adolescent risk behaviors and extrinsic versus intrinsic aspirations. In the second study, they concluded that adolescents who perceived their parents and those around them (including peers and teachers) to be autonomy supportive had stronger intrinsic aspirations for personal growth, meaningful relationships, and work within the community (2000). In the SuperDville episode referenced above, autonomy supportive peers gave strength and courage to Lily, allowing her to get the classroom accommodations and modifications she needed to succeed.



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### **The Strength of Community Activities**

In a Super Dville middle school episode centering on relationship skills, two girls (Juniper and Kaylee) plan on doing a magic show together. However, one of them (Kaylee) backs out and says that she would rather perform a dance with another friend (Willa). Juniper then realizes that Kaylee and Willa are wearing matching outfits and asks them if she can get a matching outfit too. Kaylee and Willa disappoint Juniper by making her feel like an outsider, not wanting her to wear the same outfit as the both of them. In the lesson plan based on the episode, a teacher explores what inclusion and being a member of a community really looks like, by discussing the following prompts:

- What are ways we can get to know others in our classes (our community) better?
- How can we be more inclusive to people in our community?
- Are there times you have been included or excluded as a member of a community or within an activity? How did that make you feel?

Based on those questions, students are asked to engage in activities to better know their classmates. Having activities students can engage in is part of a three-pronged approach SuperDville terms “Watch, Discuss, and Activate”. By watching clips centered on social emotional learning themes, with actors that look like them, students can absorb content through video modeling. Discussion allows for social emotional learning themes to be talked about in a safe, positive atmosphere, with a teacher serving as a facilitator. Finally, activities are a way for



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students to take the video's theme and internalize the lesson by actively engaging in a project with their peers connected to the clip they just viewed.

### **Relatedness**

Relatedness is of essential importance to cognitive, academic, and social-emotional aspects of education (Deci & Ryan, 2009), as well as to the facilitation of intrinsic motivation. Deci and Ryan (2009) state that relatedness is based upon “interpersonal affiliation, authentic care, and the sharing of enriching experiences” (p. 570). Stanley and Plucker (2008), when studying ways to increase high school graduation rates, stated that the establishment of relationships within educational environments is the key to student and community engagement, retention, and academic and personal success. Feeling connected to one's learning community is essential. Feelings of relatedness are also predictive of well-being and achievement, specifically in students with disabilities (Leon & Liew, 2016). This includes feeling connected to the peers in one's classroom and home community.

According to Gempp and Gonzalez-Carrasco (2021), evidence suggests that for both children and adolescents, peer relatedness is an essential component of their overall sense of belonging, and affects both subjective well-being and school-based well-being. Basically, if one feels a sense of connection to their peers, that connection overflows into both their school life and home life. This is especially important during a child's middle and high school years, when peer relationships take on heightened significance. According to Mikami et al. (2017), the more



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adolescents' feel related to their peers, the higher both academic engagement and academic achievement.

These feelings of relatedness are not always easy to come by, as peer disagreement and bullying are two major issues we see in middle school students (and within the above SuperDville episode). According to a panel of experts organized by SuperDville: "Bullying is an issue, both at home and in a student's world outside school." Another expert stated "The most important support we can give middle school kids is social emotional support, and teaching them how to navigate (and identify) those tougher feelings." The power of the Super Dville episodes lies in the fact that they give students the time and space to reflect on different peer scenarios, and can discuss them in a safe space with their teacher or parent.

### **Super Dville and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation in Middle Schoolers**

Super Dville is an excellent resource for teaching social emotional-learning skills, yet it can also greatly assist in the facilitation of intrinsic motivation and self-determination in middle schoolers. This is especially essential, given that intrinsic motivation creates an important forum for learning and self-discovery. When intrinsic motivation is tapped, instead of students learning things because they have to (because of an extrinsic reward, or praise, or expectation), they start learning and engaging in positive ways because they want to. Through the extensive video modeling and paired curriculum Super Dville provides, students witness not only examples of positive social behavior, but also scenarios focused on resolving conflict, acknowledging different abilities, and dealing with difficult feelings and emotions. In this era of



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increased formal social emotional learning instruction in both schools and homes, Super Dville provides not only educational entertainment, but is also an engaging and reflective curriculum that assists all students, including students with disabilities, in becoming their best selves.

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