



College of Education

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Research Highlights of Current Faculty Projects

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Classroom Social Environment and Young Adolescent Motivation and Engagement

It's hard to keep middle schoolers motivated and engaged with schoolwork. University of Illinois researcher Allison Ryan and her colleague Helen Patrick, now at Purdue University, report that classroom environments which are sensitive to developmental changes seem to help. Important developmental needs in middle schoolers include increased desire for autonomy; more reflection on abstract concepts, such as fairness; greater need for positive and supportive relationships with both peers and nonparental adults; and more self-consciousness.

Ryan surveyed over 200 students in 15 math classes in the spring of seventh grade and the fall of eighth grade. The students were from three ethnically and economically diverse urban middle schools. Ryan administered surveys to measure students' motivation and engagement (confidence, planning, monitoring their comprehension and checking their work, and misbehavior in class). She also surveyed perceptions of the social environment of the classroom, including teacher support ("Your math teacher respects your opinion"); promotion of interaction ("Your math teacher encourages you to share ideas with one another in class"); promotion of mutual respect ("Your math teacher allows students to make fun of other students' ideas in class"); and promotion of performance goals ("Your math teacher lets you know which students get the highest scores in class").

What this research tells us:

Ryan found that students who thought their teachers were supportive, promoted interaction, and promoted mutual respect were more likely to feel socially confident in dealing with teachers and peers. They were more academically confident, more likely to be engaged with their schoolwork, and less likely to be disruptive in class. Students who felt teachers publicly compared their performances in class felt less competent at dealing with teachers and peers and felt less academically confident. Such students tended to be more disruptive. Race, gender, and prior achievement were not related to changes in disruptive classroom behavior, although previous disruptive behavior predicted increased disruptive behavior. Students typically did not become more disruptive when they were encouraged to talk with one another during lessons.

Recommendations for educators of middle school students:

To help students stay involved:

- ⇒ Encourage students to know, interact with, and help classmates during lessons;
- ⇒ Help to create an environment in which students' ideas are respected;
- ⇒ Be understanding and supportive of students as individuals; and
- ⇒ Do not publicly compare students' academic performance.

For more information about this research:

Ryan, A. M., & Patrick, H. (2001). The classroom social environment and changes in adolescents' motivation and engagement during middle school. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(2), 437-460.

We invite your response...

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