Intensive studying or restlessness in the classroom: Does the quality of control matter?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Lessons consisted teacher-, shared- and competitive regulation.
- Emotional tone of interaction was warmest in the lessons with shared-regulation.
- Students concentrated on-task behavior most in the lessons with shared-regulation.
- The teacher regulated lessons had second warmest emotional tone of interaction.
- The lessons with competitive regulations had most off-task behavior.

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ABSTRACT

The way lessons are regulated by the teacher, who may support students’ autonomy or use structure and control, influences emotional tone of classroom interaction and students’ on-task behavior. The aim of this study was to explore the patterns of lesson regulation and its dynamics between students’ on-task behavior and the emotional tone of classroom interaction. Two groups of seventh and eighth graders were studied by semi-structured observation (six weeks per class, 146 lessons). The results suggest that shared regulated lessons keep students on-task and facilitate positive atmosphere better than teacher regulated lessons, whereas lessons with competitive regulation do the opposite.

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1. Introduction

The first years in secondary school are critical to students’ school engagement, their school trajectory, and hence affect their future lives (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). An increased need for autonomy and a growing interest in peer relations compete with students’ academic goals (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2008; Kilian, Hofer, & Kuhnle, 2010). At its worst, a chaotic classroom environment and teachers’ dysfunctional attempts to control it may provoke a conflict that damages the emotional tone in the classroom and disengages the students from their studies (Westling, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2013; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Sava, 2002). In turn at best, a learning environment with collaborative learning activities and emotionally warm regulation supports students’ autonomous involvement significantly (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Westling et al., 2013). Accordingly, the structure of classroom activities and especially, the level of control exercised by the teacher and the students, to regulate learning and other classroom activities, has a significant impact on students’ on-task behavior and the emotional tone in the classroom.
3. Emotional tone of classroom interaction and the quality of control

The way activities are regulated in the classroom affects the emotional tone of teacher-student interaction which, in turn has been identified as a crucial regulator for students' affective and cognitive outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Kleinfeld, 1975; Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008; Reeve, 2005; Wallen, 2008; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). Use of recognition and discussion with students has been found to increase students' positive attitude toward schooling, engagement and at-risk students' persistence, supporting internally regulated motivation as well as social and academic involvement (Knesting, 2008; Maulana et al., 2011; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Sava, 2002; Telli et al., 2007–2008; Westling et al., 2013; Woolley & Bowen, 2007; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). Use of recognition and discussion with students has been found to relate to greater liking of the teacher and greater belief that the teacher's intervention was necessary and justified (Lewis, Romi, Katz, & Qui, 2008). In turn, hostile, mistrusting and distant teacher behavior has been shown to decrease introjected motivation and achievement as well as to increase avoidance behavior (Maulana et al., 2011; Patrick et al., 2003; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005).

Teachers' way of regulating the classroom activities and use of control may vary according to the roles and patterns of interaction activated by the situations or contexts (see Andrews, 2007; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Emmer et al., 1980). However, it is not only the teacher who holds the control and authority and thus influence the emotional tone of classroom interaction, but the students also bring their emotional dispositions and learned behavioral patterns to the lesson, affecting its trajectory and contributing substantially to the emotional tone (Korthagen, Attema-Noordewier, & Zwart, 2014; Lewis, 2001; Van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, Wubbels, Fisher, & Fraser, 1998). The way students behave in terms of creating initiatives and engaging in on- or off-task behaviors affects teachers' reactions and their way of responding to the students (Emmer et al., 1980). Students may accept, ignore, or confront teachers' offers and even self-authorize themselves. In that sense, regulation of the interaction in the classroom is always shared to a certain extent (e.g., den Brok, Bergen, Stahl, & Brekelmans, 2004; Vermunt & Verloop, 1999).

Teachers' coercive control, which refers to using pressure and relying on external rewards or punishments, negating rationales, rejecting students' complaints and their expressions of negative affect, as well as assertion of power (Assor et al., 2002; Barb, 1996; Reeve, 2005), has been found to have a negative impact on emotional tone in the classroom causing anger and anxiety, decreasing motivation among students and inhibiting meaningful learning (Assor et al., 2005; Boekaerts, 1997; Mainhard et al., 2011; McCombs & Marzano, 1990; Reeve, 2009; Zimmerman, 1995, 1998).

For example Lewis (2001) found that students who experienced
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