



Academic achievement at the cost of ambition: The mixed results of a supportive, interactive environment on socially anxious teenagers



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ABSTRACT

Social anxiety impacts functional impairment in several life domains; in children, the most notable effect is a decline in academic performance. Socially anxious children report that communicating with peers and teachers, as well as public speaking are their biggest fears in academic settings. Prior research has shown that these children attribute a lack of academic achievement to difficulties communicating interpersonally or publicly. For apprehensive children, many resources are devoted to interventions at the individual level, with little consideration given to their environment – the classroom. The current study examined the association between communication apprehension, social features of the classroom environment, and academic outcomes – current achievement and future ambitions. Three out of four classroom environmental factors (promoting interaction, promoting respect, and teacher support) buffered the negative effects of communication apprehension on current academic achievement. Interestingly, these same factors *increased* the negative effects of communication apprehension on future academic ambition (intentions to attend college). Implications for the mixed results of a classroom environment that encourages communication are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The ability to communicate confidently and effectively is one of the driving forces of academic and occupational success. As social beings, communication is essential for navigating and extracting benefits from the world around us. When communication is impaired, it is more difficult to excel in social contexts such as the school environment (McCroskey, 1977). In this paper, we explore the impact of communication apprehension on adolescents' academic achievement and ambition, and consider how features of the classroom might influence these relationships.

1.1. Communication and academics

Impaired social interactions are characteristic of social anxiety disorder (Alden & Taylor, 2004), one of the most prevalent psychological conditions among adolescents (Merikangas et al., 2010). Social anxiety is linked to impairment in multiple domains, but perhaps most importantly for adolescents, causes dysfunction in the school environment. In a sample of individuals with social anxiety disorder, 91% reported school impairment, citing poor grades due to lack of participation,

avoidance of classes that require public speaking, and even instances of transferring to another university to avoid presentations (Turner, Beidel, Borden, Stanley, & Jacob, 1991). In another sample of patients with any anxiety disorder, 49% reported leaving school prematurely, and of those that left, 24% indicated anxiety as the primary reason. "Problems speaking in front of the class" and "feeling too nervous in school and in class" were the two most highly endorsed reasons for not enjoying school (Van Ameringen, Mancini, & Farvolden, 2003). This research suggests communication apprehension may be one mechanism for academic impairments associated with anxiety disorders.

Communication apprehension is an "internal cognitive state centered around the fear of communicating with others" (Richmond & McCroskey, 1985, p.29). This apprehension can interfere with academic functioning in several ways. Students with communication apprehension prefer larger classes with less interaction, are less likely to speak with teachers, enjoy school less, and earn lower grades than their non-apprehensive peers (McCroskey, 1977). Communication apprehension is also associated with increased rates of school dropout (Monroe, Borzi, & Burrell, 1992). Communication apprehension in the classroom setting appears to negatively affect both academic achievement (i.e., grades) and ambition (i.e., desire/plans to stay in school).

1.2. Classroom environment and academics

Given the evidence demonstrating the academic impairments linked with communication apprehension, it is essential to explore potential

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buffering factors. The classroom environment may be one such factor. The classroom is an inherently social environment with students learning alongside peers. Arguably, impairments in communication disrupt social processes linked to standardized learning and result in decreased academic achievement and ambition. It is possible that classroom environmental factors could minimize this disruption, leading to greater achievement and ambition. Indeed, research suggests that certain qualities of classrooms and teachers can promote healthy student outcomes. Classrooms that promote social self-efficacy (defined as confidence about communicating with teachers/students) are linked to academic engagement (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). Overall, positive classroom environment is also associated with academic and social self-efficacy, engagement, and motivation (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

Four specific features of the classroom may influence social processes involved in learning and student performance and persistence on academic tasks (Ryan & Patrick, 2001): promoting interaction, promoting mutual respect, promoting performance goals, and teacher support. Of these dimensions, teacher support has received the most scientific attention. Student perceptions of teacher support are linked with more interest and enjoyment in schoolwork and greater academic achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011) and motivation (Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Supportive teachers may be especially important for apprehensive students, who struggle with school engagement and enjoyment.

Research also suggests that promoting interaction and mutual respect lead to better academic outcomes, while promoting performance leads to worse outcomes. In classrooms that promote positive interactions, students are more engaged (Patrick et al., 2007), report a greater sense of belonging, and view school as more valuable (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Alternatively, students who perceive their classrooms to emphasize competition and performance place less value on school, report less school belonging, and participate less, which in turn leads to lower academic achievement (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Promoting positive interactions and respect, rather than competition and performance, may be a key classroom feature that can improve academic outcomes for apprehensive students.

1.3. The present study

The present study examined relationships between communication apprehension, classroom social environment, and academic achievement and ambition in a sample of Hong Kong adolescents. We explored whether a positive classroom environment mitigates the adverse effects of communication apprehension on academic achievement and ambition. Specifically, 1) when students perceive their classrooms as supportive and promoting interaction and respect, we expect a weaker, negative relationship between communication apprehension and academic outcomes; 2) when students perceive their classrooms to promote performance and comparison, we expect a stronger, negative relationship between communication apprehension and academic outcomes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample was obtained from 13 classes in Hong Kong secondary schools. In international comparisons, the scores of Hong Kong students are among the highest for mathematics, reading, and science (PISA; OECD, 2013). Participants included 407 high school students (43% female; mean age = 16.8, $SD = 1.30$). Seventy-three percent of the students were born in Hong Kong. The majority of students (89%) came from schools that taught in Chinese, with the remaining (11%) from schools that taught in English.

2.2. Measures

Scales were adapted using translation and back-translation procedures by the fourth author and a team of professional translators. The items were further refined by an expert panel of school psychologists, counselors, and teachers with experience working with high school students.

2.2.1. Predictors

2.2.1.1. Communication apprehension. Communication apprehension was measured using the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PCRA; McCroskey, Beatty, Kearney, & Plax, 1985), a 24-item scale assessing trait apprehension about communicating with others. The PCRA produces subscales assessing communication apprehension in four contexts: group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking. The original validation studies indicated sufficient evidence for construct and predictive validity (McCroskey, 1978). Only the interpersonal conversation and public speaking subscales were used. The group discussion and meeting subscales were omitted, both because they are less relevant to the classroom, and because previous research has not supported these factors as separable in Asian samples (Pribyl, Keaten, Sakamoto, & Koshikawa, 1998).

The interpersonal conversation subscale consists of the three positively worded items from the original PCRA (three reverse-scored items were omitted; see results section for details). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” to three items: 1) While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous; 2) Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations; 3) I’m afraid to speak up in conversations. Similarly, the public speaking subscale’s three positively worded items were: 1) Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech; 2) My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech; 3) When giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

2.2.1.2. Classroom social environment. The Classroom Social Environment Scale (My class-teacher version, Ryan & Patrick, 2001) measured student perceptions of classroom social environment. This 24-item scale assesses student perceptions of four aspects of the classroom: the degree to which the class teacher promotes interaction, respect, performance, and levels of teacher support. Students responded on a 5-point Likert scale to items such as, “My class-teacher would like my classmates to respect each other.” Each subscale has been shown to be reliable and valid across different samples of US adolescents (Patrick & Ryan, 2005).

2.2.2. Outcomes

2.2.2.1. Academic achievement. Students completed face-valid items about their academic performance. Students were asked to review their recent report card prior to responding. First, using a 6-point Likert scale, students provided information on their grades with “6” representing an “A”, “5” representing a “B”, and so on. This variable was normally distributed, with the majority of students (65%) reporting their recent grades as “C” or “D”. Second, they rated their overall academic performance by placing themselves in one of five categories when compared to their classmates: top 10%, above average, about average, lower than average, and bottom 10%. Responses to this question were normally distributed, with most students placing themselves in the “average” categories (81%), and fewer students rating themselves in the top (5%) or bottom (14%) categories.

2.2.2.2. Academic ambition. Students reported on their intentions to attend university by answering either “yes” or “no” to: “Do you have

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