

Abstract

The impact of close friendships and student engagement on academic achievement is particularly important in high school, as students are on the verge of entering the adult world. This study examines how the quality of high school students' close friendships and their engagement predict their academic achievement. School psychologists and educators can utilize this information to advocate for practices that encourage the development of close friendships and to implement methods shown to increase student engagement.

Literature Review

- Students tend to affiliate with peers who have similar academic characteristics and achievement (Ryan, 2004; Shin & Ryan, 2014).
- Students without friends have lower levels of academic achievement and more academic distress (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004).
- The presence of just one close friendship appears to lessen the adverse effects of extensive peer rejection (Parker & Asher, 1993).
- Students report being more engaged in school when their close friend is loyal and supportive (Berndt & Keefe, 1995).
- This engagement affects their academic performance, as students who are more engaged tend to have higher GPAs and educational ambitions than their peers who are less engaged (Wang & Peck, 2013).

Current Study

This study examines the predictive factors of the quality of close friendships and degree of engagement on high school students' academic achievement.

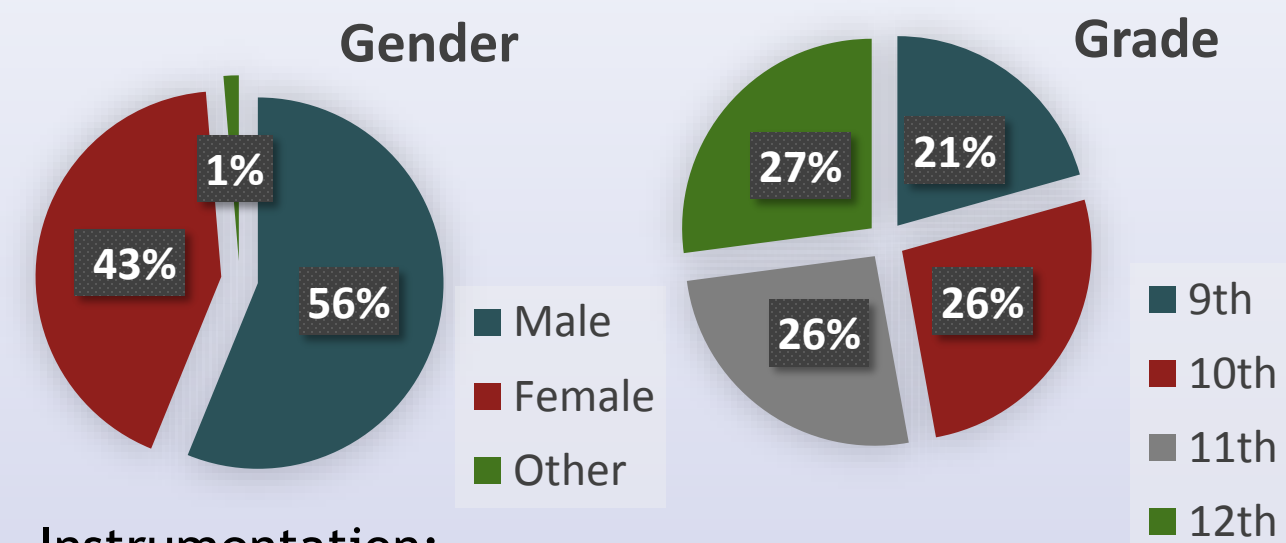
Methods

Participants:

- 155 students at three Midwestern high schools responded.

Methods (continued)

Demographics:



Instrumentation:

- Students were surveyed using the Social Support Scale for Children (SSSC; Harter, 2012) and the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton et al., 2006), along with self reporting their grades and answering four qualitative questions about their friendships and engagement in school.

Results

- A Pearson correlation revealed that the close friend support/regard (CFSR) scale of the SSSC was significantly correlated with overall student engagement (SEI-Total) ($R=.26, p<.01$) and GPA ($R=.16, p<.05$).
- When included in multiple linear regressions along with other SSSC scales, however, CFSR was not a significant predictor of SEI-Total. SEI-Total was a significant predictor of GPA, but CFSR was not.
- We hypothesized that the relation between close friendships, engagement, and GPA might differ based on the duration of the friendship. To examine this, we created 3 groups based on reported close friendship length (Low= <5 years; Medium= $5-9$ years; High= 10 or $>$ years).
- We found that the percent of variance in student engagement accounted for by CFSR was highest (adjusted R squared = .53) for the Low group. CFSR was a borderline significant predictor of SEI-Total ($B=.13$ (95% CI= $-.01-.27$); $p < .10$) for this group.

Results (continued)

Finally, we ran additional multiple linear regression analyses predicting GPA from CFSR and SEI-Total for each group. We again found that SEI-Total was a significant predictor of GPA, but CFSR was not, for all groups.

Qualitative Data

	Percentage
How closest friend helps performance:	
Study/work together	34.7%
Encourages/supports	31.2%
They do not help performance	27.7%
How closest friend hinders performance:	
They do not hinder performance	50.7%
Distracts	30.2%
Socialize outside of school	11.2%
What most encourages interest in school:	
Getting into college	13.5%
Participation in extracurricular activities	11.6%
Interesting classes	10.9%
What discourages interest in school:	
Uninteresting classes	19.3%
The effort/time it takes	15.2%
Homework	14.0%

Discussion

- Student engagement was found to significantly predict participant GPA, but the quality of their close friendship did not.
- Qualitative data revealed that an awareness of the long-term benefits (e.g., obtaining a diploma, attending college, a career) most encouraged student participation and interest in school.

Discussion (continued)

- Qualitative data also revealed the majority of participants believed their closest friend helps them with the work associated with school or by emotionally bolstering them. Half of the participants reported their friend does not negatively impact their academic performance.

Implications for school psychologists:

- School psychologists should work with other school staff to provide students with an understanding of how their efforts in high school will pay off in the future to increase student engagement.
- To assist high school students in obtaining an additional source of support, school psychologists should encourage the use of classroom strategies shown to help students develop friendships in high school.

Selected References

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