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TEACHER SUPPORT: A STUDY ABOUT TEACHER EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND  
ENGAGEMENT AMONG MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS

By

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Bachelor of Science, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, 2006

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

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Teacher Support: A Study About Teacher Emotional Support and Engagement Among Middle School Boys

Chairperson: Trent Atkins

Engagement in school has been recognized as important for achievement in multiple ways, and yet adolescent boys have been observed to be less engaged in school than their female peers. Boys are less motivated than girls, spend less time on homework, and have lower expectations of themselves (Barber, 1996). Boys experience the following school and personal events at rates higher than girls: discipline referrals, suspensions, failing and near-failing grades, and also suicide. This study examined the differential responses between boys and girls in terms of perceived teacher support and student engagement.

The study began with an initial survey distributed to all seventh and eighth grade students. The school closure due to COVID-19 resulted in a lower participation rate in the initial survey. Of 55 boys in seventh and eighth grade, 20 boys (35%) responded to the survey. Of 58 girls in seventh and eighth grade, 45 girls (78%) responded to the survey. Seven of the female respondents (16%) and 4 of the male respondents (25%) reported that teachers do not support them. Male students were then interviewed about their engagement in school. Of the 16 students who reported teacher support, 15 of them (94%) reported engagement in school. Of the 4 students who reported no teacher support, 2 of them (50%) reported engagement in school. In the follow-up interview, students were also asked to identify specific teacher practices that made them feel supported in school. Students identified the following teacher practices as supportive: answering questions and offering help, caring about students as individuals, maintaining high expectations and providing challenging work, and asking students for their opinions and thoughts about the work. These support practices will continue to be identified, implemented, and evaluated in middle school classrooms at Lolo School during upcoming school years.

# Teacher Support: A Study About Teacher Emotional Support and Engagement Among Middle School Boys

## *Introduction*

Middle school teachers around the country struggle with the problem of student engagement. While many students maintain focus and participation in class, others fail to be cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally engaged at school. Studies have found that adolescent students are less engaged than their younger schoolmates, and adolescent boys are less engaged in some regards than adolescent girls. Boys are “less motivated than girls and spend less time doing homework” and “girls are more likely than boys to plan, monitor, and regulate their cognitions and study activities” (*Lam et al*, 80). Although they are equally engaged cognitively, adolescent boys are less behaviorally and emotionally engaged than their female peers.

In an effort to uncover the causes of these differences in engagement, researchers have looked at factors that influence student engagement. Studies have investigated how parent, peer, and teacher support impact the engagement of students. Despite common notions of peer interactions as most influential on students, studies have found that “support provided by adults is so influential that students’ positive perception of it may mitigate the effect of contextual risk factors posed by belonging to a certain social class or ethnic group” (Fernandez-Zabala et al., 49). The study done by Fernandez-Zabala and fellow researchers found that “more than support from parents or peers, it is support from teachers that correlates most with all three dimensions of school engagement” (Fernandez-Zabala et al., 50). Ruzek and his fellow researchers found that students reported higher engagement in emotionally supportive classrooms. It is because of these study findings that I decided to investigate how teacher emotional support impacts engagement for middle school boys.

### *Statement of the Problem*

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship that exists between teacher support practices and student engagement. More specifically, I want to determine whether a change in teacher behavior in terms of emotional support for boys can have a positive impact on the emotional and behavioral engagement of adolescent boys. Previous studies have identified the differences in perception of support between middle school boys and middle school girls. Studies have also indicated that perceived teacher support is more connected to engagement than both perceived parent and perceived peer support for middle school students.

The initial questions I'm trying to answer are as follows: From their own perspective, why are adolescent boys disengaged at school? Do adolescent boys perceive that they have less support as they get older? Why do boys perceive that they have less support in adolescence? What specific things can teachers do to help adolescent boys engage with school?

### *Statement of the Hypothesis*

Male students will perceive less teacher support than females. Male students who experience more teacher emotional support will be more engaged in school, both emotionally and behaviorally. Boys who perceive a sense of autonomy and opportunities for choice will experience higher engagement. This study will seek to uncover specific teacher support practices that increase emotional and behavioral engagement among adolescent boys.

### *Significance of the Study*

Adolescent boys are less engaged in school than their female peers. Engagement is recognized as important for achievement in multiple ways (Lam 2012). Without engagement, participation in school work and homework decreases, and achievement levels for boys decline. Boys are less motivated than girls, spend less time on homework, and have lower expectations of

themselves (Barber, 1996). Boys experience the following school events at rates higher than girls: discipline referrals, suspensions, failing and near-failing grades, and also suicide. At Lolo School, seventh and eighth grade boys experience higher rates of discipline referrals and suspensions than their female peers. Boys experience higher rates of failing and near-failing grades than female peers, as well as referrals for IEPs and academic interventions. Boys also experience higher rates of referral to on-site mental health services. By identifying specific teacher practices that lead to male students experiencing support in class, this study intends to propose practices that will increase school engagement, and thereby reduce these negative experiences, among middle school boys.

### *Limitations*

This study has limitations, including its limited focus on middle school students, which means that findings are not applicable to students at other grade levels. This study took place in a public school setting, and does not represent the experiences of students in private, charter, homeschool, or other school settings. Montana's unique geographical, demographic, and social characteristics produce an environment that may not be experienced by students in other states or locations. Students in areas that are more racially or socioeconomically diverse may have different experiences than students attending public school in Lolo, Montana. Teacher gender was not isolated in this study, so there was no determination of whether teacher gender has an impact on emotionally supportive practices or on student engagement.

The biggest limitation imposed on this study was the impact of the school closure on the results. Far fewer students completed the initial survey because we were out of school. Many of those students also failed to complete the regular class work while remote learning. Additionally, I wasn't able to interview all of the identified students because they did not respond to my

attempts to contact them. This was not uncommon among some of our families, even for contact about regular school work. For the students I was able to interview, some of them struggled to give specific examples of teacher support in the classroom. They were able to make general comments, but many had forgotten the details of their daily classroom experiences.

### *Review of Related Literature*

A common challenge facing middle school teachers is how to maintain engagement and motivation among their students. The Glossary of Education Reform defines student engagement as “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education” (Partnership, 2020). Teachers and educational leaders seek to identify factors that impact student motivation, and then work to include those factors in the classroom, curriculum, and individual lessons (Olmanson, 2016). The difficulty is that motivation is more complex than a specific input leading to the output of increased motivation or engagement. Individual students are motivated by different “external, internal, behavioral, cognitive, and altruistic” factors, none of which are easily picked apart and translated into a programmatic curriculum that fits every student (Olmanson, 2016). Our understanding of student engagement must be more nuanced in order to address the specific needs of individuals.

As students get older, they become less engaged - cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally - so interventions are needed to increase engagement in middle school students (Mustafaa, 2017). Students are more engaged in classrooms with high quality student-teacher interaction, but by fifth grades students also know how to *seem* engaged. As a result, teachers must develop ways to gather honest student feedback to gauge student engagement rather than relying on their own perceptions of student engagement (Rimm-Kaufman, 2015). Girls tend to be

more emotionally and behaviorally engaged than boys, so more work needs to be done to uncover the cause of these gender differences (Fernández-Zabala, 2016). This study found that teacher support correlated most with engagement, so should be used to increase student engagement for all students. In another study, researchers found that students reported higher engagement in emotionally supportive classrooms. Students were more likely to have positive peer relationships and more opportunities for choice in those classrooms, which partly explained the link between teacher emotional support and student engagement (Ruzek, 2016). This suggests that more work can be done to identify specific emotional support strategies that teachers can use to help foster student engagement.

In another study which found that teacher support had the highest effects on academic performance, there wasn't a gender difference between supports and achievement - where perceived teacher support existed, academic performance existed, regardless of gender (Lam, 2012). However, girls in that study scored higher on levels of perceived teacher support, and also scored higher on levels of engagement. This leads to the conclusion that further investigation is needed to figure out the link between student engagement and academic performance for both girls and boys. Since boys are less likely to be engaged, more work is needed to determine how to engage boys better. More work could be done to determine why boys perceive less teacher support than girls - is this because teachers support girls more, because boys perceive supports differently than girls, or some combination of the two? Finally, information must be gathered about what specific teacher practices produce student perceptions of support.

### *Design*

The design of this investigation was a study which examined the experience of teacher emotional support from adolescents' perspectives. After participants were selected, they were



given surveys to complete, seen in Appendix 1: Student Questionnaire. Their responses were analyzed in order to identify and describe any patterns that existed. Upon analyzing this data, I was able to identify specific students to focus the direction for further investigation. Twenty students were selected based on their reports of feelings about school and relationships with teachers. Those students were interviewed with the questions in Appendix 2: Student Interview.

### *Procedure*

After I got general permissions to conduct the study with these participants, they were given the survey to complete online. The original plan was to conduct these surveys in class, but the school closure made this method impossible. Students had access to the survey via google classroom instead, and I pushed it out to them once a week for three weeks to collect as many responses as possible. After completion of the surveys, I contacted the parents of 20 male students to get specific permission for them to be interviewed over the phone. I sent out an initial email and followed up with phone calls to schedule the interviews. Finally, I analyzed students' answers in order to identify any patterns in the data. This provided direction for further investigations into the phenomenon of teacher support and student engagement, as well as proposed action steps to be taken in the classroom.

### *Participants*

Participants came from seventh and eighth grade classes at Lolo Middle School. The focus of this study was the perceived teacher support students receive, and the potential for different experiences for different genders. Participants for the initial survey included both boys and girls. The design called for all seventh and eighth grade students, but not all participated. The interview portion was conducted exclusively with male students.

### *Instrument*

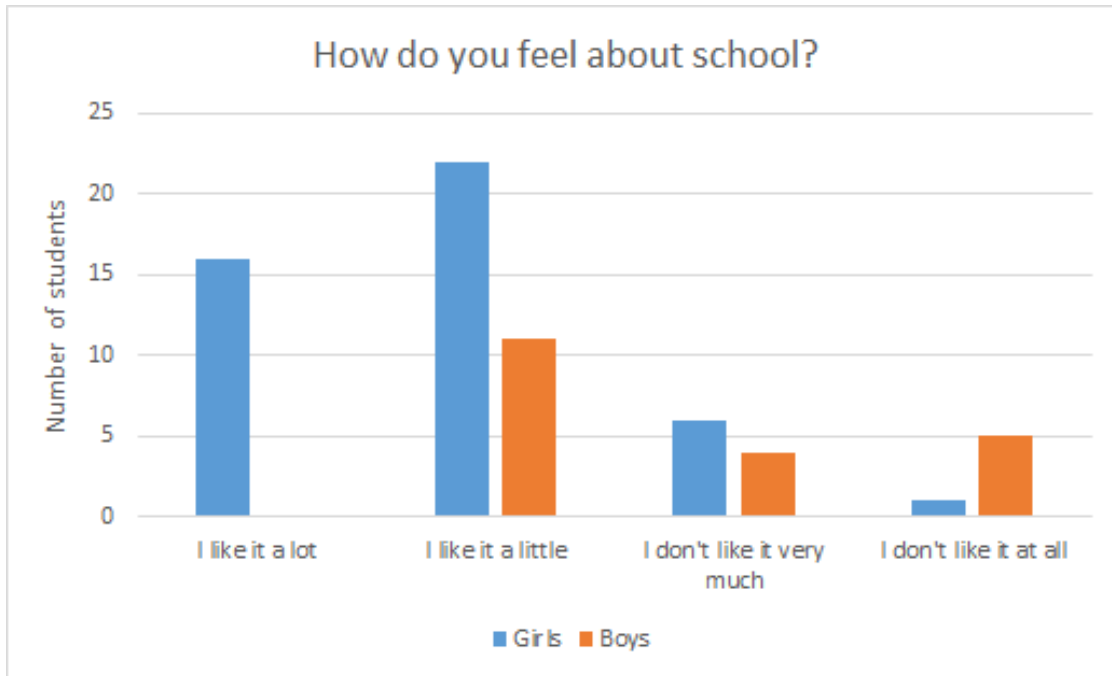
The students completed an initial survey to determine perception of teacher support and whether teacher emotional support has a positive impact on student emotional engagement. The survey questions came from the HBSC (Health Behavior in School-aged Children) and are included in Appendix 1. The survey asked participants to rate their relationships with school, teachers, parents, and peers. Participants were also asked to describe their own engagement at school. The follow-up interview was completed by a smaller group of male students, identified from the initial survey. The interview asked students to describe specific teacher behaviors that they identified as emotionally supportive and provided additional information about middle school boys' engagement in specific classes at school. The interview questions are included in Appendix 2.

### *Findings*

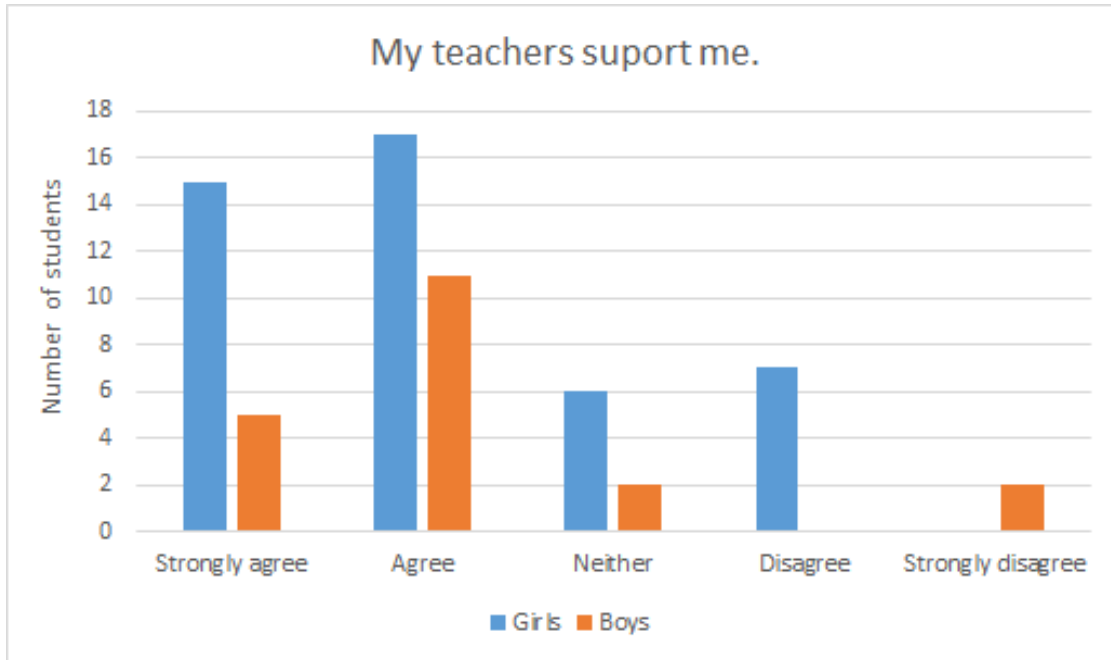
The findings of this research were significantly impacted by the school closure and constraints imposed by collecting data via email and phone. The collection and analysis of results for this research became more difficult after the school closure. A number of students stopped participating in school work, and some even became unreachable as the closure extended. Out of 113 enrolled students in seventh and eighth grade, 65 completed the initial survey. Of those 65 respondents, 20 were male students. The design called for a follow-up interview with 20 male students - ten students who expressed poor relationships with teachers and the school, and ten students who expressed positive relationships with teachers and the school. Because only 20 male students responded to the survey, I contacted all of them for interviews. Sixteen of those students were interviewed, while the other four failed to respond to multiple emails, phone attempts, and google classroom communications to contact them.

The response rate alone was an early indicator of the rate of participation in general among male students. Lolo's seventh and eighth grade includes 55 male students and 58 female students. Given the demographics of our seventh and eighth grade, this meant that 36% (20 out of 55) of boys submitted the survey and 78% (45 out of 58) girls submitted the survey. While it has been difficult to track overall school participation and work completion during the school closure, we have determined that we had more male students than female students who completed *no* work during the two months of school closure. This low participation rate in regular school work among male students impacted their participation rate in the survey as well - students accessed the survey in the same way that they accessed school work, so those not doing school work also did not do the survey. This made it difficult for me to gather data and interviews from those male students least engaged in school because I only interviewed students who completed the initial survey. Those who did not complete the initial survey were not part of the interview process, and so their responses about engagement and teacher support are not represented in the data.

When asked how they feel about school, 0% of male respondents said "I like it a lot," 55% said "I like it a little," 20% said "I don't like it very much," and 25% said "I don't like it at all." In contrast, when both male and female students were included, 25% said "I like it a lot," 51% said "I like it a little," 15% said "I don't like it very much," and 9% said "I don't like it at all." These responses were collected from only 65 of the 113 seventh and eighth grade students (58%), and do not include students who have stopped doing work since we began remote learning.

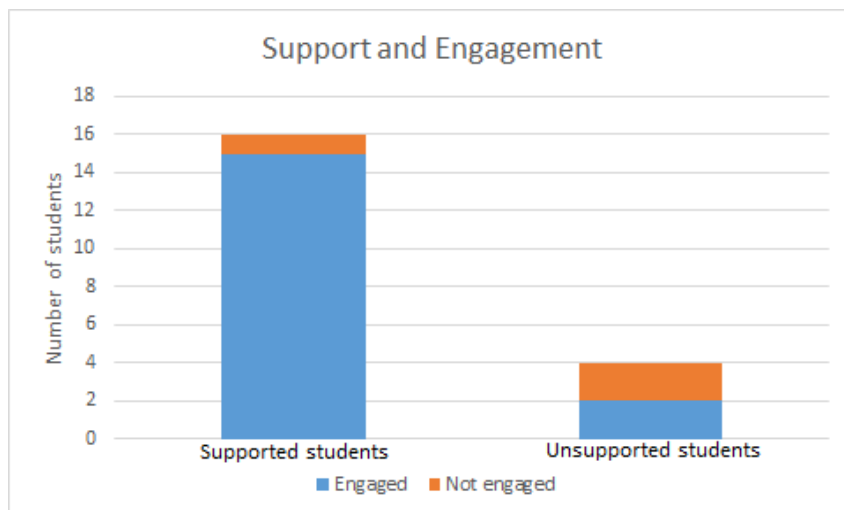


**Do male students perceive less teacher support than female students?** I thought that male students would perceive less teacher support than female students. Of the 45 female respondents, three students (7%) said they disagreed or strongly disagreed that teachers support them. One female student who agreed that teachers support her disagreed that peers and family support her. Of the 20 male respondents, four students (20%) said they disagreed or strongly disagreed that teachers support them. Two of those students who disagreed that teachers support them also disagreed that peers and family support them. Therefore, only two male students (10%) who perceive support in other relationships reported perceiving no support from teachers.



**Are male students who perceive more emotional support more engaged in school? I**

thought that male students who experience more teacher emotional support would be more engaged in school, both emotionally and behaviorally. Of the 16 male respondents who said they agreed or strongly agreed that teachers support them, 15 of those students reported being engaged in some or most of their classes. Of the four male respondents who said they disagreed that teachers support them, two of them reported that they were not engaged in any classes. The other two reported that they liked only PE, and only sometimes.



In other circumstances, I could use the chi-square test to determine whether the frequency of the tested conditions changed based on the variables I was testing. For example, I could examine the frequency with which boys and girls experience different levels of teacher support. I could also examine the frequency of engagement experienced by supported and non-supported students. However, the chi-square test has been determined to be inappropriate to use for cases in which the expected frequency is less than 5 in over 20% of the cells (Preacher, 2001). In both conditions I described above - teacher support experienced by both genders and engagement experienced by supported and non-supported students - the expected frequency is less than 5 in 50% of cases, so the chi-square test cannot be used.

**Do autonomy and choice lead to higher engagement?** I thought that boys who perceive a sense of autonomy and opportunities for choice would report higher engagement. The boys who reported being engaged in class gave the following reasons for their engagement: hands-on activities, trying new things, interesting topics, challenging work, movement (PE), and fun activities. None of the students identified autonomy or opportunities for choice as reasons for their engagement in school.

The follow-up interview was intended to uncover specific teacher support practices that increase emotional and behavioral engagement among adolescent boys. I asked all 16 of the boys I interviewed to list specific things that teachers do that makes them feel supported. Students were allowed to give multiple answers if they chose. Six students said that teachers answer questions and offer help. Five students said that teachers have individual conversations with them and care about them as individuals. Four students said that teachers have high expectations, provide challenging work, and push them to do more. Two students said that teachers ask them for their opinions and thoughts about the work. One student said that teachers offer extra time,

extra help, and multiple chances on work. One student said that the teachers make the classroom a welcoming environment. One student said that “all the teachers are happy about [school], not just cranky about” being at work. One student described specific events when he felt that teachers were on *his* side, when they believed his account of events and agreed with him, even though other adults took the other side. It was important to him that the teachers were listening to him and not siding with the other adults *just because* they were adults.

Number of students	Support practice
6	Teachers answer questions and offer help
5	Teachers have individual conversations with students and care about them as individuals
4	Teachers have high expectations, provide challenging work, and push students to do more
2	Teachers ask students for their opinions and thoughts about the work
1	Teachers offer extra time, extra help, and multiple chances on work
1	Teachers make the classroom a welcoming environment
1	Teachers are happy about being at school
1	Teachers believe students and take their side, rather than side with adults just because they’re adults

Four students were unable to give examples of specific teacher support practices. They either said that they were not sure, could not think of or remember anything, or did not pay attention to that while in class. One of those four students said that teachers do “Nothing, they don’t do things to help.”

### *Conclusions*

This study's results did not support the hypothesis that boys would perceive less support than girls, but did support the hypothesis that boys who perceived more support would report more engagement in school. Students did not identify choice or autonomy as reasons for their engagement in school. This study provided details about the specific teacher behaviors that give emotional support for adolescent boys in the classroom. The practice that boys most commonly identified as supportive was teachers' willingness to answer questions and offer help to students. It was beneficial to get information directly from the students in order to understand how they perceive teacher emotional support. They were more forthcoming in the individual interviews than they have been in whole-group, in-class discussions about these topics.

### *Recommendations*

The purpose of this study was to collect preliminary data that could be used to begin a cultural change within the seventh and eighth grades at Lolo Middle School. As stated previously, seventh and eighth grade boys at Lolo experience higher rates of: discipline referrals, suspensions, failing and near-failing grades, referrals for IEPs and academic interventions, and referrals to on-site mental health services. By implementing specific teacher practices that lead to male students experiencing support in class, I intend to increase school engagement, and thereby reduce these negative experiences, among middle school boys.

My protocol for increasing teacher support and student engagement will include the questions I asked students in this research project, as well as additional steps by the seventh and eighth grade teaching team. We will have all students complete the initial student interview during the first month of school and conduct individual follow-up interviews with all students who report that: they don't like school at all, they don't believe teachers support them, or they



are not engaged in school. This will take time, but it will give us valuable information about the individual needs of the students with whom we're working. We will review the data at a PLC meeting during October in order to identify specific practices to put in place to increase these students' perceptions of teacher support and engagement at school. We will begin with the most common practices identified by students as effective for making them feel supported. For example, the most common supportive practice identified by students in this study was answering questions and *offering* help (as opposed to waiting for students to ask for help). That would be the first practice introduced and regularly monitored.

Although it would be ideal to have specific data about how many times teachers engage in this practice, the additional burden of recording that practice would likely be inconsistent. Instead, I propose to check in with the seventh and eighth grade teachers every other week during our PLC meeting about their frequency in using our student-identified supportive practices. After one month of consistent application of our first identified support practice, we would add the second most commonly identified support practice. One month would give us sufficient time to make the first practice a habit before introducing the second practice. In order to verify whether our work and implementation of these practices has had the intended effect of increasing perceived support and student engagement, I will repeat the initial survey again in April with all students. I will compare the answers for students' responses to questions about whether: they don't like school at all, they don't believe teachers support them, or they are not engaged in school. A decrease in responses to these questions would suggest a possible positive impact of the teacher support practices.

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## Appendix 1

### Student Questionnaire

Please read and answer the following questions. These questions ask about your experience, so there are no wrong answers. If you're not sure about the meaning of a question, just ask. Please do your best to give as much detail as you can.

1. Please write your gender (boy, girl, other identification)
2. Please write your grade (7th or 8th)
3. How do you feel about school?
  - I like it a lot
  - I like it a little
  - I don't like it very much
  - I don't like it at all
4. How pressured do you feel by the schoolwork you have to do?
  - Not at all
  - A little
  - Some
  - A lot
5. How often have you taken part in bullying another person(s) at school in the past couple of months?
  - I have not bullied another person(s) at school in the past couple months
  - It has happened once or twice
  - 2 or 3 times a month
  - About once a week
  - Several times a week
6. How often have you been bullied at school in the past couple of months?
  - I have not been bullied by another person(s) at school in the past couple months
  - It has happened once or twice
  - 2 or 3 times a month
  - About once a week
  - Several times a week

For items 7-20, tell how much you agree or disagree with each statement. Consider ALL classes and teachers when giving your answers.

7. The students in my class(es) enjoy being together.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. Most of the students in my class(es) are kind and helpful.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

9. Other students accept me as I am.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

10. I feel that my teachers support me.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

11. I feel that my teachers care about me as a person.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

12. I feel a lot of trust in my teachers.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13. My friends really try to help me.  
Strongly agree  
Agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree
14. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.  
Strongly agree  
Agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree
15. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.  
Strongly agree  
Agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree
16. I can talk about my problems with my friends.  
Strongly agree  
Agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree
17. My family really tries to help me.  
Strongly agree  
Agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree
18. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.  
Strongly agree  
Agree  
Neither agree nor disagree  
Disagree  
Strongly disagree

19. I can talk about my problems with my family.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

20. My family is willing to help me make decisions.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

## Appendix 2

### Student Interview

Please read and answer the following questions. These questions ask about what you think, so there are no wrong answers. If you're not sure about the meaning of a question, just ask. Please do your best to give as much detail as you can.

1. How often do you have a conversation with a teacher?
2. Are you interested or engaged in any classes at school? Which one(s)?
3. What makes this class(es) engaging?
4. Do your teachers listen to you?
5. Do your teachers believe that you can succeed? How do you know?
6. What specific things do your teachers do to make you feel supported in the classroom? These can be things that teachers do or say or how they set up their classwork and classroom. Please list as many as you can think of.