

The Micro-Interactions of Belonging: Combatting Adolescent Isolation Through Low-Stakes Relationality

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Article History

Received: 20.02.2026

Accepted: 23.03.2026

Published: 08.04.2026

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Abstract: Young Adolescent students in Grades 7 and 8 require Relatedness, Competency and Autonomy to thrive. This study explored two Grade 7 and 8 schools for one year, collecting student voice to determine what makes a difference for connectedness, skill development and autonomy. In a time where social media creates an increasing pandemic of loneliness amongst our teens, small micro-interactions allow students to feel connected to their schools. Low-stakes opportunities to fail or succeed increase their competency and small opportunities for agency within the classroom builds trust and engagement. In this small study (n=524) students were asked “what was the best part of their week” and clear patterns emerged. The importance of non-evaluative adults, low-stakes environment and allowing students to have agency increased connectedness and wellbeing. This article uncovers the low-cost interventions that will strengthen trust and connection. Although social media is here to stay, through thoughtful steps, schools can build strong connections that will lead to strong students in our Middle School environments.

Keywords: Middle School, Self-Determination Theory, belonging, wellbeing, engagement, adolescent.

Cite this Article

Dr. S. McHolm, (2026) The Micro-Interactions of Belonging: Combatting Adolescent Isolation Through Low-Stakes Relationality *GRS Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, Vol-3 (Iss-4).12-20

Introduction

While digital connectivity is ostensibly limitless in the eras of sophisticated mobile apps and ubiquitous wireless connections, the Canadian adolescent is currently trapped in a profound paradox: never have students been more digitally “connected”, yet never have they reported such high levels of isolation and exclusion (Faulkenberg & Heringer, 2024). Since 2010, globally there has been a plummet in our teens’ mental wellbeing indicators, with notable increases in the number of adolescents experiencing anxiety, isolation and depression (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Haidt, 2024; Twenge, 2017). In the 2025 Canadian National Report, titled *The Health of Young People in Canada: Focus on Mental Health*, research showed that 27% of Grade 10 girls reported feeling “sad or hopeless” in 2010, but by 2022 it had jumped to 54% (Government of Canada, 2025). Transgender youth statistics are even more grave, with 68% feeling sad or hopeless every day for a minimum of 2 weeks in the 2022-23 school year (Government of Canada, 2025). While these statistics represent a national crisis, the epicenter of daily social negotiation for these adolescents remains the school environment. According to the Canadian National Report, hospitalizations for people aged 5 - 24 are up, with 25% as the result of mental health crises (Government of Canada, 2025). In Ontario, The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)

found that 28% of students feel they have a low subjective social status, which represents a marked increase (CAMH, 2025). Links to over or problematic use of social media plays a key role (Haidt, 2024). As students enter High School, the number of students with online followers soars, but enriching real-life relationships dip significantly (Haidt, 2024). Students have increased access to picture perfect influencers, rapid comparisons to others and a world of judgement through likes and negative messages. The era of low-risk mistakes found in the world pre-smart phones and social media has been exchanged with a high-cost world of virtual realities where mistakes can have dire consequences for life. Students are feeling less deeply and socially engaged and more socially anxious. A “loneliness epidemic” among adolescents is shrouding youth during their vulnerable neuro-re-wiring phase of teenagerhood. Schools are often tasked with “fixing” these vulnerable students. It is a complex task. Schools are now tasked to educate, socialize and insulate students from the depravity and dangers of the unregulated World Wide Web. This broad scope leaves education torn between academic achievement and student wellbeing. Although schools often measure progress through “big” metrics of standardized tests, achievement scores, suspension rates and participation in extracurricular activities, we are missing the “micro-moments” that foster daily resilience. This study explores student voice and choice from Grade 7 and 8 students in two schools over two academic

years. By examining features of belonging through micro-interactions with staff and student autonomy/agency, this study looks to uncover the “hidden” relational needs of adolescents through unstructured, non-evaluative student feedback. Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, this study explores how low-stakes moments of visibility and agency function as critical protective factors, offering a scalable framework for reclaiming school belonging in an increasingly fragmented digital age.

Literature Review

Adolescence is a distinctive stage of development where youth move away from the guidance and protection of their parents and start seeking out peer relationships to guide and challenge them (Oberle et al., 2024). They explore their emerging and shifting identities through comparison, competence development and independence. They become increasingly more influenced by mentors and peers than their family system (Adeyemi & Okoye, 2025; Oberle, et al, 2024). Because of this shift away from family protection, students are highly sensitive to social exclusion in Grades 7 and 8. The enticement of social media platforms that use addiction strategies to commercialize their products (Haidt, 2025) promise digital “connectedness” but instead provoke the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) (Twenge, 2017). Seeking digital “connection” or “belonging”, adolescents check, post and re-check their status. This divided attention and distractibility leads to increased anxiety and a feeling of isolation (Government of Canada, 2025).

The Biological Imperative: Belonging as a Social Buffer

Adolescence is a period of heightened sensitivity to social evaluation and need for belonging (Towner, Chierchia & Blakemore, 2023). Research indicates that feeling connected to a group or having a sense of belonging acts as a protective factor against psychological stress (Samadieh et al., 2025). When brains are in a state of calm, they are more readily primed to learn. Being surrounded by calm people, the positive contagion of calmness readies the brain to accept learning more easily (Chinweokwu & Okoye, 2025). Conversely, social exclusion activates the defence responses in the body, located in the dorsal Anterior Cingulate Cortex (dACC). This area of the brain is activated when experiencing both physical and emotional pain. Neuroscientists discovered that we cannot distinguish the difference between a broken bone and a broken heart. So, when students are “unfriended”, “blocked” or ridiculed online, their dACC activates and detects a discrepancy between what they expect/hope for (inclusion/safety) and what they feel as exclusion. The Anterior Insula is also activated when feelings of social exclusion occur, creating that “gut wrenching” pain of heartbreak. The need for belonging is biological. It is required for calmness, enhanced learning capabilities and memory retention. During early adolescence, the brain is going through extensive re-modelling and neuro-pruning making the dACC more sensitive to all types of stimulation. Peer rejection or exclusion has a more significant impact on the adolescent’s brain and wellbeing. Equally as important, positive micro-interactions with teachers and school staff calms the dACC alarm and moves the student out of the “etal” to the “learning mode” (Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams, 2003). If social exclusion triggers the same neural pathways as physical pain, a student experiencing isolation is biologically ill-equipped to focus on academic tasks. Within the context of this

study, belonging represents a fundamental necessity to learning, competence building and exercising autonomy.

The “Loneliness Epidemic”

Surrounded by people, never has a generation felt more alone. Looking at a group of adolescents at a time before social media and today is truly a different sight. Pre-social media adolescents would be conversing, engaging through eye-contact and levels of physical intimacy while navigating social norms. This low-stake, multiple interactions helped pre-social media adolescents to become competent within the social spheres of their world. Today, that same table can have a group of peers together, but often they will not be talking. They will have their phones or devices out and little conversation between them occurring. As Grade 7 & 8 students approach 7-9 hours daily on social media (Haidt, 2024), superficial connections are circumventing meaningful in-person relationships (Zhang & Browne, 2025). The displacement of micro-interactions is having a significant impact on the wellbeing of students and their sense of belonging.

The Supportive Adult as a Protective Factor

Research consistently establishes the link between school connectedness, wellbeing and adult health outcomes (Oberle et al., 2024; Yuen & Wu, 2024). When school staff recognize and engage with students outside of their duties, they counteract the negative effects of social exclusion, loneliness and isolation. This is a critical goal of education. Statistics Canada (2025) associates adolescents that have a strong sense of belonging with higher general and mental health outcomes long-term. Ninety-six percent of students with strong senses of belonging also reported good physical and mental health (Stats Canada, 2025). Deep relationships with school staff make a significant difference to adolescent’s sense of belonging, but grand gestures are not the only way to enhance connectedness in school. When students see small actions of connections and interest from school staff, they begin to feel seen. Identifying these connections with adults (e.g., “The teachers are amazing. They always say “hi” to me in hall, even though they don’t teach me”) highlight the importance of student Perceived Social Support (PSS) (Yuen & Wu, 2024). In a recent study of Grade 7 & 8 students, Cronbach’s α highlighted how adult support at school ($\alpha = 0.84$) for Grade 7 students and ($\alpha = 0.83$) for Grade 8 students (Oberle et al, 2024) makes a statistically very significant impact on wellbeing. Adolescent students, although seeking autonomy and independence, need connection and support from adults, particularly those in their schools.

Belonging and Academic Achievement

Within an increasingly individualistic Canadian society, academic achievement is considered one of the key indicators of success. Belonging has often been treated as a secondary factor of school ranking (e.g., Canada’s Simon Fraser Institute School Rankings only assesses school achievement based on high-stakes standardized tests). Yet research consistently shows that belonging is a prerequisite for academic success (Allen et al., 2022; Korpershoek et al., 2020). The reciprocal relationship between belonging and academic achievement, is in no small part, cultivated by school staff. Noticing who is “seen” and ensuring that all students are valued increases students’ Perceived Social Support (PSS) factor. When adolescents are connected to a trusted adult, they will seek support when struggling, as well as affirmation when persevering to reach goals. Korpershoek and colleagues

(2020) confirmed that belonging is a key internal driver when engaging in productive academic struggle.

Cultural and Identity-Based Belonging

A student's intersectionality is a critical piece to finding a sense of belonging with people that accept them. Because we live in a very diverse modern era, positionality, visible and invisible markers of identity vary amongst teens exploring their self-expression. Statistics Canada (2025) note that a sense of belonging is easier for the dominant group, and that belonging varies greatly as intersectionality increases with equity-deserving identities. A single approach will not have the same outcome with all adolescents. Part of the nuanced role of a supportive adult in a school setting is to find those variant entry points and match them with their intentional interactions.

Relatedness, Competence and Autonomy

The Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) posits that human flourishing requires an environment with three core pillars: Relatedness, Competence and Autonomy. For adolescents, this need is acute; as they developmentally distance themselves from family for guidance and pivot toward external environments to fulfil these requirements. Schools represent these ecosystems of growth through the consistency of routine and learning duration by establishing relatedness (belonging), autonomy (student choice and independence) and competence (skill development). In the Intermediate/Middle school context, these psychological needs manifest as a search for inclusion and personal talent capacity. However, these needs exist in tension with the "social pain" of isolation—a sensation amplified during the adolescent brain's significant re-modelling phase. When these three needs are met, students show astounding periods of growth.

While Self-Determination Theory provides the macro-level psychological scaffolding for student well-being, the actualization of these needs occurs within the granular, everyday exchanges between students and staff—a phenomenon defined here as micro-interactions. Micro-interactions are defined as short, points of contact that are non-evaluative in nature, specific to individuals, show a level of interest and care for the student. These micro-interactions can be seconds in duration but identify connection between the individuals. Relatedness, achieved through micro-interactions, occur through small examples of staff caring.

Autonomy, a second SDT pillar, is achieved through choice in the form of selecting how to learn and demonstrate that learning. Finally, the need for competency in safe environments is met, through both academic and non-academic arenas such as sports, art, or music programs. Through relatedness, competency and autonomy, Grade 7 and 8 students are more engaged and thrive. Ultimately, when these SDT needs are met, students don't just succeed academically; they develop superior wellbeing markers that persist well into adulthood (Adeyemi & Okoye, 2025; Edwards et al., 2021; Yuen & Wu, 2024).

Competence, the third pillar of SDT, is of particular importance to the developing identities of adolescents. Through talent development, students find peer groups of shared interests. This in turn increases a sense of belonging and lowers the stakes of failure. In this study, students sought opportunities that showcased their improvement and skills. With all three pillars of Self-Determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000), Grade 7 and 8 students flourish.

Methodology

A qualitative case study design was employed to capture the nuanced experiences of students, as this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of relationality within a specific educational context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using a multi-set case study approach, this article explores Grade 7 and 8 students' voice and belonging in schools, and how it leads to competence building and autonomy seeking. This study embraces an unstructured qualitative dataset using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) combined with a Thematic Analysis approach. The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of analysis, beginning with familiarization of the data (reading the data), coding the data (identifying recurring comments), generating initial themes (patterns of low-stakes encounters), reviewing themes, defining themes and consolidating understanding through the self-determination theory (SDT) framework. After overlaying the findings onto Deci and Ryan's SDT (2000) tenets of relatedness, autonomy and competence; the data was triangulated by comparing comments of the two participating intermediate schools for increased trustworthiness and results validation.

Participants and Setting

The data was collected over two school years in two different towns. The participant pool (n=524) was intentionally broad to capture a cross-section of the student body, ranging from varsity team athletes, French Immersion students, developmental disabilities students and students with disciplinary track records. The students were all in Grades 7 or 8 in two schools. Although they were in different towns, they shared similar student population sizes and had a similar distribution of wealth. Both schools had a band / orchestra program and had an alternative curriculum education class. The schools were comparable in size, staffing and make-up. This diversity ensured that "belonging" was examined through the lenses of both high-achieving and traditionally marginalized student populations. Students were randomly selected and students' names were anonymized. The researcher did not have the names of the students when reviewing the data. A naturalistic setting was used, as the data was collected as part of a regular weekly school "pulse check", meaning the students were not under the pressure of a formal or lengthy "research interview". They knew they did not have to participate and that these check-ins were non-evaluative.

Snapshot Instrument

Students were asked a single question at the end of every week. "What was the best part of your week?" or "What did you like about your classes this week?" These questions were intentionally broad and elicited a variety of responses. There was not predetermined rubric or topic that was being sought. There were 524 distinct data points collected.

Data Triangulation

There was a distinction between the tone and focus of the two schools' comments. In one school, the data thematically had an emotional focus and discussed more about the impact of relationship with staff. The second school's data had a more action oriented/activity-based record of their experience. A pattern of autonomy, skill development/competence and choice arose often in both schools. Together, these datasets show the importance of relationships, competence and autonomy, aligning with Self-Determination Theory.

Findings

For this study, 524 data points were collected from two different Grade 7 and 8 schools, each for one year. In the open-ended check-in question, students were not guided in their sharing. Therefore, comments often showed overlapping components of Relatedness, Autonomy and Competence found in the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This reality emphasizes the inter-relatedness of these components. Often Grade 7 and 8 students expressed the importance of doing something successfully with people that they trusted. In Figure 1, it is noted that there were 217 counts of competence (skill development), 182 counts of relatedness (belonging) and 45 counts of autonomy (student choice).

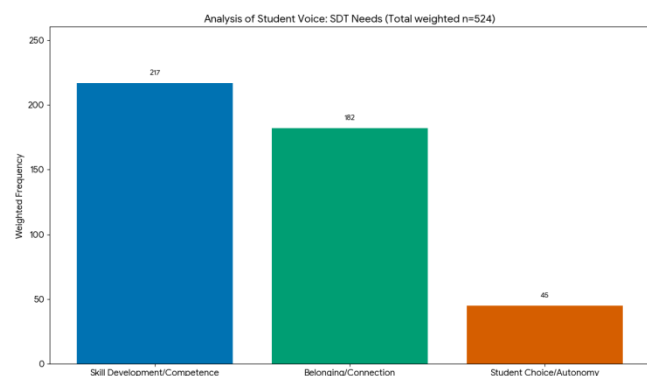


Figure 1 Analysis of Student Voice Overlaid on Self-Determination Theory Pillars

The figure shows pride surrounding skill development is critical for the Grade 7 and 8 student. It is connected to identity, belonging and wellbeing.

Competency and Skill Development

A significant 48.9% of student comments centred on skill acquisition and iterative improvement, providing a remarkably optimistic outlook on student engagement. This frequency suggests that students are not merely passive participants; they are active agents in their own development, exercising control and effort to improve their lives. Their drive for growth implies a foundational trust in staff to act as scaffolding for their efforts. For instance, one student’s distinction between simply doing art to “mastering techniques” signals a sophisticated shift in perception. It acknowledges that creative expression is also a rigorous acquisition of transferable skills—moving the classroom experience from a creative outlet to a pathway towards competence. For example, “learning about blending when making the poppies” one noted that, “I like how the shading of the poppies looks, and now I can use it in my other sketches”. Similarly, music was also a high frequency subject for skill acquisition. For most students, learning to play an instrument was new. All students selected an instrument that was new to them in Grade 7, so at most, students would have had two years of practice and skill development. They showed great pride in this area, as seen with this quote, “I got to put my saxophone together and I am excited”. This quote shows the anticipation of learning as a positive thing, and that the very rudimentary skill of assembling their chosen instrument brought them joy. Then moving into the application of skills one student noted, “It has been fun learning to play *Pirates of the Caribbean* in music”. Although not the music that most students would actively listen to, the happiness of creating music through practice and skill attainment is clear. It shows the progression of skill development. A final

example is related to Mathematics. This is not a new skill, but the progression of skill development that often is seen as difficult for many Grade 7 and 8 students. One student gleefully said, “I liked my math test. I like putting myself to the test”. This shows self-challenge and confidence in the process of learning. Wanting to stretch themselves is important to identity development. For Grade 7 and 8 students, skill development and the satisfaction that comes from improvement, not specifically academic achievement, are wellbeing boosters (Yuen & We, 2024). Samadieh and colleagues (2025) demonstrate that it is with social support that early adolescents achieve more, develop more adaptive skills and have stronger conflict management skills. By focusing on improvement rather than achievement, the students within this study indicate that the pre-requisite of belonging is at work.

Connectedness and Belonging

The second highest frequency of comments related to belonging and connectedness. With 182 explicit data points or 34.7% of all comments, belonging is critical for Grade 7 & 8 students participating in this study. Although 34.7% of comments explicitly refer to belonging and connection, many of the other comments have a pre-requisite of belonging for “safe failing” when making mistakes like, “I am working on layouts. I miss a lot, but it is okay”. Although this statement was included in the competency category, without acceptance of self and by others, it would not be psychologically safe to risk that public process of improving.

Staff made an impact in this theme’s comments. Firstly evident, was the distribution of comments naming specific staff was irregular. Certain staff had a greater impact on students. Of the 182 comments about belonging, 78 comments included a staff member’s name. In Table 1 *Named School Adults that I Connect With*, the individuals in support roles carry significant importance to students.

Table 1 Named School Adults that I Connect With

Total Named Mentions (n=78)

Category	Frequency (Weighted)	Percentage of Named Mentions
Educational Assistants	26	33.3%
Child and Youth Worker	14	18.0%
Other Named Staff (Teachers, Admin, Custodians)	38	48.7%

Note: 1 EA, and 1 CYW were off on medical leaves for extensive periods of time during the study period. Supply staff were not present consistently, and therefore it could be suggested that their collective impact may have been more significant if they had been.

The individuals named most often as providing belonging and connection (except for one named teacher), were not solely the student’s teacher. By role, Educational Assistants (EA) and Child and Youth Workers (CYW) made the deepest and most trusting relationships based upon the number of comments that named them. Considering only a small number of students that directly work with these staff, their impact is significant. Even more significant is that these 3 staff members of 68 total staff members highlight how specific actions of individuals make a difference. The Child and Youth Worker (CYW) role, although only working

half-time and on leave for 6 months at one site, was directly mentioned by name 18% of the time. Educational Assistants (EA) were named 33.3% of the time. Combining these two categories into support staff, an astounding 51.3% of all comments of belonging are attributed to them. Those that work slowly, quietly and connect deeply create strong sense of community with the students.

Long lasting events were not as frequently noted as examples of belonging building interactions. For the Grade 7 & 8 students, the data bore that frequency of interaction was vitally important to their perceived sense of social support. The importance of small acknowledgements (micro-interactions) came up often within this category of relatedness or belonging. In Table 2 *Breakdown of Micro-Interaction Types*, quick “hellos” or acknowledgements were enough to increase a sense of connection and relatedness. Simply knowing a student’s name made a difference.

Table 2 Breakdown of Micro-Interaction Types

Micro-Interaction Type	Weighted Frequency	Primary from Data	Examples
The "Hallway Hi" (Visibility)	28	"Teachers say hi in the hall even if they don't teach me."	
Affective (Smiles/Patience)	21	"She just waits and smiles," "The staff are patient."	
Personalized Recognition	15	"They know my name," "Asking how my weekend was."	

Table 2 demonstrates that small, regular actions are noticed by students and valued. These micro-interactions do not take extensive periods of time or elaborate planning – just being present and acknowledging the students’ presence strengthened the students’ sense of belonging. These micro-interactions have high frequency rates, are non-evaluative exchanges and did not take any specific preparation on the part of the staff member. The culminative effect seen in the data suggests that these micro-interactions are the primary mechanisms through which students gauge their safety and belonging.

Autonomy and Student Choice

Within Self-Determination Theory, the concept of autonomy is sometimes misunderstood. It does not mean “total independence”, although adolescents at this stage of development will assert more independence than in previous stages of development. Within the data, although statistically significant, it produced the lowest frequency of comments. This is not surprising in the context of question, “what did you enjoy this week?” or “what was the best thing at school this week?”. These open-ended questions led to more descriptions of events rather than comments about how things were done in the typical learning environment. Despite the parameters of the question, the students still cited the importance of the how. The power of having a choice for the small things such as who to work with, where to sit and how to approach the learning (e.g., genius hour), still rose to a level of importance.

The category of Autonomy in a Grade 7 and 8 school is not full autonomy. Schools run on schedules, assigned class groupings and curriculum. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, we acknowledge that we are discussing micro-autonomy which is the

power of choice within the limits of the school system. This can include the how we reach specific learning goals or sometimes when we need to reach them, but not if we need to reach them. The three subcategories of Physical Agency, Relational Agency (creating inclusion or social buffers), and Curricular Agency. To express autonomy within the context of an Intermediate School / Middle School, a student has several constraints but being able to exercise some autonomy indicates a level of trust and belonging between the school staff and the students. Without this pre-requisite, students would not be permitted to approach their learning through their preferences.

Table 3 *Descriptions of Sub-Categories Found Within Micro-Autonomy* defines the distinctions between the patterns within the category of Micro-Autonomy. These sub-categories highlight a change in teaching pedagogy, but for the most part have low input costs. Teachers’ classrooms that permit students to choose to work within the space in a way that they are more physically and psychologically more comfortable makes a difference to their wellbeing and belonging.

Table 3: Descriptions of Sub-Categories Found Within Micro-Autonomy

Agency Type	Weighted Frequency	Primary Student Focus
Physical Agency	22	Control over their environment (flexible seating, floor work, picking a desk).
Relational Agency	15	Control over their social safety (picking partners, choosing project groups).
Curricular Agency	8	Control over their learning tasks (Genius Hour, picking essay/art topics).

Grade 7 and 8 students show clear preferences in their learning that allow for choice. A pre-requisite having that option is a level of trust and belonging that is mutually shared between the students and the staff. When students demonstrate the maturity to make supportive learning decisions, teachers will respond in-kind with more flexibility and autonomy. Table 3 shows that although there were not as many comments as were found in Competence and Belonging categories it does indicate is that students value these small, low-cost/no-cost pedagogical moves of teachers that trust them.

A pattern of physical agency arose the highest within the micro-autonomy data. Physical agency is having a choice of where to learn within the geography of the classroom. Students expressed the desire to work in the hallways or lay on the floor or sit with their friends while working. One student said, “I like that in Science we can choose where we sit, even on the floor if we want.” Being able to sit on the floor or lie on their stomach on the floor represents a break from the typical confines of classroom learning. It signals trust between the student and the teacher.

Relational agency also spoke to micro-autonomy within the classroom. Having the ability to create inclusive circles of belonging and create social buffering from those that students feel as threats to their wellbeing can be seen in the active process of selecting work partners. The need for social safety is an important aspect of learning. Understanding adolescents’ heightened activity in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex helps explain why this micro-

autonomy is sought by adolescent learners. One learner put it this way, my teacher, “lets us pick our own groups for the project, which made it way more fun and we got more done.” Relational agency is a micro-autonomy that drives connection and a sense of safety within the adolescent learner.

Finally, curricular agency, where students can express voice and interest is critical to developing learning autonomy moving forward. Discussions by participants about inquiry-based learning approaches, where students selected topics and constructed pathways of research was very popular. Having choice in the work that aligned with interests also made learning more enriching. For example, one student shared, “I liked doing the pixel art math because we got to choose the character we were making”. In the end, the skill being learned was the same for its expression aligned with student interests. By having choice and a creative way to learn, a student will engage in productive struggle more willingly.

In Figure 2 *Breakdown of Student Choice and Autonomy (n=45)*, the graph shows that the greatest importance for students is about their physical space and where they are learning within it. As schools relax their physical structures to include quiet reading spaces, carpets and calming lights/environments, we see that flexible seating and classroom configurations make a difference to students’ learning environment preferences. Then, as adolescents are driven by peer connection increasingly, the locality of where they sit and with whom becomes important. Thirdly, Figure 2, shows that making choices about how they learn, increases engagement.

Figure 2 Breakdowns of Student Choice and Autonomy

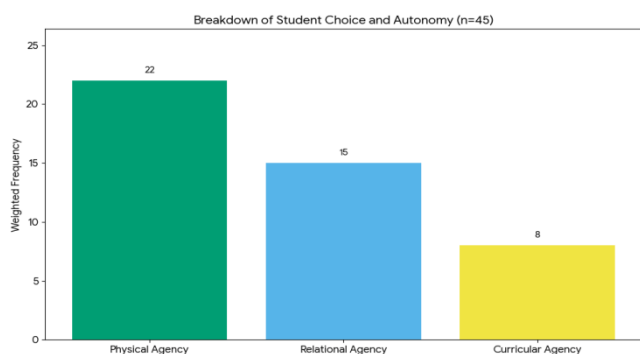


Figure 2 shows that physical, relational and curricular agencies (autonomy) are important expressions of autonomy. Within the confines of school learning structures, when teachers show more trust and flexibility, students respond with stronger senses of enjoyment and engagement.

Acts of micro-autonomy fit the young adolescent learner. It represents a gradual release of control on the part of the teacher and leaves more individual expression to surface amongst the learners. Micro-autonomy is key aspect of the adolescent learner, but less expressed in comments as compared to belonging and competence. Together, these comments soundly replicate the work of Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory.

Contributing Factors for Belonging, Competence and Autonomy

Further found in the data three additional patterns arose. They included non-evaluative spaces for belonging and emotional safety, the importance of low-stakes learning and the role of non-evaluative adults when creating connection. Each of these findings support the research that describes having educational spaces that

are not as directly connected to judgement and evaluation are important for overall student wellbeing (Allen & Bowles, 2012). Having informal relationships built around non-classroom activities (e.g., intramurals, clubs and causal contacts) make adolescents feel more than just students. When analysing the location of the activities which promoted belonging and connection, a pattern of spaces where clubs or intramurals occurred (e.g., the band room, the library, the gym during intramurals) and the hallways where adults acknowledged students as individuals not for their academic merit. These zones of belonging are noted in Table 4 *Zones of Belonging* highlights how less academically focused spaces promote inclusion. (It should also be noted that although this pattern emerges, for some students, these speciality zones of a school, when curriculum is compulsory, do not experience inclusion or belonging in these spaces). Although the pattern emerges as a positive contributor to belonging, this does not apply to all students.

Table 4 Zones of Belonging

Zone Category	Weighted Frequency	Key Student Examples from Data
Active Zones (Gym, Intramurals)	58	Playing intramurals like Dodgeball, Volleyball, and basketball; “Being active in the gym.”
The Arts Zones (Music, Art)	42	Participating in band, playing new instruments like the Tuba, or Saxophone; having creative choices in Art or Art Club, Having a “chill vibe” in the Art room.
Transitional Zones (Hallways, Foyer)	26	“Four or five teachers saying “hi”, to me, makes me feel seen”. “People greeting me in the hall.”

In Table 4, spaces that are not associated with traditional academically challenging spaces like hallways, the Arts spaces and the gymnasium promote belonging for many students. Twenty-four percent of comments related to these specialized spaces. For adolescents, self-expression and competency outside of the academic settings creates a strong sense of identity, pride and enjoyment (Allen & Bowles, 2012).

Embedded in the Arts comments was the recognition that the teachers were patient and caring. The students noted that artistic expression (in a variety of forms) promotes competence and serenity. Comments about the “vibe” of the space showcased the pleasure that actively engaging in music or art were linked to a low-stakes environment of practice and improvement. One student said, “I love to start my Monday morning with an early band practice. It sets me up for a great week”. Comments such as “liking how it [the art] turned out” or “it was hard, but I got the fingering” and “I can’t believe how far I’ve come” speaks to not only competency but the sense of acceptance when partaking in these activities.

In the transitional zones of the hallways and foyer, many students account for a sense of belonging and enjoyment through the micro-interactions they informally have with adults. Many students mentioned how they were happy when an Educational Assistant or a teacher that doesn’t work with them specifically still knew their name and would want to connect. That genuine interest in students

for no other reason than to get to know them, makes students feel seen and valued.

Many patterns emerged in the data. They fell into the categories of Connectedness, Competency and Autonomy. Also, zones of the school where academic judgement was lower also tended to create a sense of connection. Building relationships with staff that do not have that evaluative role, also show promise for increasing connection.

Discussion

According to Ryan and Deci (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) requires that a person has Connection/Relatedness, Competence and Autonomy. The data in this study showed that these three areas hold significance to student engagement and enjoyment in school. Different than Self-Determination Theory, there was not a balance between the three areas. For Grade 7 & 8 students, more importance was placed upon developing skills or having competencies, followed by comments about belonging and connectedness with the last expression found related to autonomy. This hierarchical finding stands to show that students are seeking to build confidence and social currency through skill attainment. They want to be seen as competent. But the subject areas where this was found to be the most enjoyable, and perhaps holding the greatest peer attention, was in the non-academic realms such as art, music and athletics. Although pride for academic skill development, such as learning a language, being a stronger reader/writer, having mathematical talents and engineering expertise did surface, but not with the same frequency as the arts and athletics. This supports the importance of arts and athletics to adolescent identities.

Many of the comments that stressed the importance of talents and skill development also had requisite needs of belonging and acceptance. Comments related to the acceptance of short-term failure (“I make lots of mistakes, but my teacher helps me”) links acceptance/belonging to that skill development. Low-stakes skill development requires a level of pre-existing confidence or connection to the individuals that may judge them. This finding supports the idea that when a staff member connects and accepts them, students will push themselves further to develop skills.

The least common theme of autonomy still had a significant number of comments. It shows that autonomy comes after relatedness and competence grows. A desire for more student autonomy, at this age, is the typical developmental path. This bore out in the data, but more importantly, the amount of autonomy that students were reporting fell into the category of micro-autonomy. They were seeking no-cost classroom choices such as sitting on the floor or in the hallway. They were wanting to pick working partners and topics to learn about. These small gestures of choice signal to students that their teachers trust them. Trust is a foundational driver of belonging and confidence. When students feel trusted, they are more willing to risk learning and failing. Signals of trust, delivered through students’ expression of micro-autonomy greatly impact their relationships with the school staff.

The research confirms low-cost, low-time investments that make a world of a difference to reducing student isolation and increasing belonging for Grade 7 and 8 students. Being seen or known from staff in a non-evaluative context is critical to combat the isolation that many students are experiencing in the digitally oppressive age of social media bombardment. Setting a welcoming tone that is “chill”, giving students lots of low-stakes opportunities to develop

new skills and allowing greater degrees of student autonomy all add to the wellbeing of adolescent students in the study. Having non-academic spaces for students creating zones of belonging that surfaced as important to students’ sense of self, competence and wellbeing. Together, having caring adults that trust their students, having relationships with them not based on academics, and providing support when they ask for it creates the best outcomes for students.

Being known without evaluation is a key observational pattern found within the data. Support staff that typically do not grade students had a disproportionate impact on students’ sense of wellbeing and belonging. The simple action of saying “hello” to students in the hallways, “all the teachers are great here. Even the ones that don’t teach me say “hello” on the daily”, was cited repeatedly as an important aspect of what made their week great. Staff members taking notice of students’ birthdays, out of school activities and their pets names made students felt valued. One student shared, “they have even shown up at three of my hockey games”. This action shows that the staff member wanted to show support outside of the classroom, and therefore, it built trust inside of the classroom. Acknowledging students by name in micro-interactions, in hallways, in the community or at their sporting events made students feel known and valued. This visibility combats the invisibility on social media.

Another finding is found around the need for safety. Within the competitive world of academic advancement, particularly intense within Grade 7 and 8 structures, students need to risk learning or develop new skills. In several of the comments the students focused on the importance of a “chill” environment so that they could express themselves. The most recognized staff members were those that were “always calm”, “chill”, “laugh with us”, “welcome me every day” and say “hi”. When students are not worried about being yelled at or disappointing an adult, they are more likely to risk trying something that they cannot yet do. This came up in physical activities, music classes, learning a new language and art classes. It spilled over into students appreciating the choice of tasks in academic classes (e.g., math, English, science) so that they could begin where they knew they would be successful and then move forward to a more challenging task. There was also the recognition that when teachers attempted to do something they were not as good at, like playing in the staff-student games or having “Dad jokes” for every occasion, or when staff tried to be “funny” but in a “bad Dad joke way”, this made the students feel more safe to try new things. Students need to see us all learning, making mistakes and continuing to try. When Grade 7 and 8 students have the opportunity to learn and develop skills in a relaxed environment, they are more willing to engage in the sometimes-awkward world of learning something new.

What students need in Grade 7 and 8 can be explained by Ryan and Deci’s (2000) Self-Determination Theory. In this stage of rapid growth and development, students are seeking competence. They are seeking acceptance and acknowledgement. They are seeking autonomy. The research substantiates how the interplay of these themes builds greater satisfaction with school life. The things that made the greatest difference were no-cost moves by the adults in the building. Connecting with students in a non-evaluative manner, saying “hello” and knowing their names, made students feel seen and valued. Having outlets for excellence in all realms of the school (athletics, music, art, Math, English, Science, French) served different students differently. Students at this age are looking for their niche. They want to feel that they are recognized

for being good at something. Also developmentally driven to have independence, having choice and autonomy fuelled their feelings of trust, respect and belonging. Grade 7 and 8 students that feel seen, have opportunities to show their competence in a wide array of realms with some micro- autonomy are healthier and happier.

Conclusion

This study explored that relationship of 524 non-evaluative comments about student experiences in school and their sense of Connectedness, Competence and Autonomy. Through the themes within the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), there were clear patterns of significance. Adolescents crave being seen as skilled at things that are important to them. They need connectedness before they can risk failure and with growing confidence, they seek autonomy. Without having belonging and competence, students do not seek autonomy.

The staff of the school matter. Those that make connections with students in a non-evaluative context (coaches, club leaders, greeting students, creating a “chill” environment) can make deeper connections with students. It is the continuity of connection, not the complexity of academic connection that makes a difference. Being able to laugh and cheer their students stood out as a fundamental key to creating acceptance and belonging in a 7 and 8 school environment.

In this study many low-cost or no-cost interventions were described by the students as having impact on their week. Greeting a student, for many students was the highlight of their week. This means that students need connection and they are seeking that connection in the smallest of ways.

Early adolescence is a time of great change and exploration. In a digital age of intense social content bombardment, the most frequent actions that staff made with impact were outside of the classroom and were in the real world. Through smallest of actions and being truly present, staff can counter the isolation that students are feeling in the social media age. While the social media trends drive isolation, middle schools can act as an anchor of hope and connection for adolescents exploring their pre-adult identities.

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