



Your Classmates Shape How You Learn

What classmates do can quietly motivate students

Excellent Educator, 3(17), 2, 2026



Research in Brief

Researchers first explored students' experiences through focus groups and then conducted an experiment with 605 undergraduate students. They identified seven peer behaviours that can signal a fixed or growth mindset: self-deprecation, withdrawing effort, explicit verbal messages, competitiveness, unwillingness to help, boasting about success and downplaying struggles. Students exposed to growth-mindset peer behaviours were less likely to perceive the peer as having a fixed mindset. In turn, perceiving peers as more fixed-mindset was associated with lower belonging, stronger imposter feelings, greater evaluative concerns and more avoidance of academic challenges.

The message is important: classroom culture is not created by teachers alone. Peers can communicate powerful signals about who is "naturally good" at a subject, who is struggling, and whether taking an academic risk is safe. Earlier research cited by the authors also suggests that growth-oriented peers can strengthen motivation, belonging and challenge-seeking.

✓ Try Tomorrow

- Notice how students talk about their own ability: "I'm bad at maths" versus "I'm still figuring this out."
- Encourage students to explain how they solved something rather than simply announcing that they got it right.
- Make helping classmates part of the classroom culture.
- When students share a difficulty, treat it as useful information rather than something embarrassing.

★ One Key Takeaway

Students learn motivational messages from classmates as well as teachers.

Keywords

Peer influence, classroom culture, mindset, belonging, academic risk-taking, imposter feelings, student motivation



Original Research

Seo, E., Lee, S. Y., Muenks, K., & Yan, Y. *The secret language of peers: How peer behaviours signal mindset and influence classroom experiences*. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 95, 1286–1309.