

Social engagement, critical awareness promote young people's life satisfaction, academic success: Study

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Young people who challenge social injustice and are politically active show high life satisfaction and better academic performance, says a

University of Michigan researcher.

A new study by Matthew Diemer of U-M's Marsal Family School of Education, along with Miriam Schwarzenhal of the University of Wuppertal and colleagues in Germany and the U.K., sheds new light on the importance of critical awareness and [social engagement](#) among young people in Germany. This new study is published in the journal *Child Development*.

At a time when racism, discrimination and authoritarian movements are on the rise worldwide, it is crucial to understand how young people act in an unequal society and stand up against injustice, the researchers say.

The international team studied whether different groups of young people exhibit different critical consciousness patterns and how they relate to their development. They found that classrooms that challenged racism and other forms of inequality were associated with higher levels of critical consciousness.

For the study, researchers surveyed 663 Berlin adolescents with [diverse backgrounds](#) from 17 schools, with an average age of 13.

"We saw that German adolescents who were more critically conscious, more understanding of inequalities in Germany, more involved in action were happier and doing better in school one year later," said Diemer, U-M professor of education and psychology. "The key is understanding the direct connection of critical consciousness to positive youth development, things people care about, such as well-being and achievement success.

"So rather than schooling that talks about inequality and encourages people to challenge those inequalities being viewed as a 'waste of time' or taking away from the core mission of instruction, in this case, it was

associated with young people being happier and doing better at school a year later."

According to the results, three different types of adolescents could be identified:

- The uncritical type: Didn't reflect much on social inequity and didn't intend to act to redress it.
- The armchair activists: Reflected much on social inequity but only had medium intentions to act to redress it.
- The actionists: Showed medium to high critical reflection and high intentions to act to redress social inequity.

"Importantly, the 'actionists' showed the most positive development out of the three groups. They not only showed higher life satisfaction but also were more engaged at school," said Schwarzenthal, a junior professor at the University of Wuppertal's Institute for Educational Research.

"In contrast, the 'armchair activists' showed the least positive development out of the three groups. Some of these developmental consequences could still be observed one year later."

However, critically reflecting on social inequity and acting against it may be a resource for adolescents' [development](#). This was the case for all adolescents, whether or not they belonged to a more disadvantaged group (such as immigrant-origin or Black youth) in German society. This is important because it illustrates that more privileged young people also have roles to play in critiquing and acting to change social injustices, Schwarzenthal said.

"The findings have important implications for educational practice. They show that it is crucial not only to encourage adolescents to think

critically about [social injustice](#) but also to show them possible ways to participate in actions to change social conditions," she said.

For Diemer, several lessons and insights from the Germany study hold true in the U.S.

"There are some important differences, but we have similar research in the U.S. showing that [young people](#) with higher levels of critical consciousness seem happier and better adapted," he said. "They do better in [school](#) and better in their career. We are now seeing that same finding replicated in Germany."

More information: Critical, active, and well adapted: Antecedents and consequences of adolescents' critical consciousness profiles, *Child Development* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.13979](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13979)

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