

How do we help students from disadvantaged backgrounds feel confident about school?

April 1 2024, by Rebecca J. Collie and Andrew J. Martin



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Research [shows](#) that students who are confident about their ability to succeed at school tend to be more academically successful.

Researchers call the thoughts, actions and emotions behind this confidence "academic agency." Essentially, it is about students' sense they are able to do particular things that will help them succeed at [school](#). This might involve perseverance with study, coping with tough experiences (such as exam nerves), and following school rules.

Previous [research](#) has suggested students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be less confident about school than students from high-socioeconomic backgrounds for [various reasons](#), including fewer resources at home and less access to technology.

But this is not always the case.

Our [recent study](#), published in *Social Psychology of Education*, looked at what makes students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds confident about their schooling.

Our research

To measure students' confidence, we looked at survey responses from more than 20,000 students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds from 421 New South Wales government schools.

The responses came from the NSW Education Department's "Tell Them From Me" [survey](#), which measures [student engagement](#) and well-being.

The study enabled us to look at five different indicators of academic confidence: students' sense of being capable at schoolwork; feeling they

belong at school; perseverance in schoolwork; ability to bounce back from challenges; and appropriate behavior at school.

We used students' scores on these indicators to categorize them into confident "profiles" or low-confidence "profiles."

To measure [academic achievement](#), we looked at students' NAPLAN scores in reading and numeracy.

Our findings

Around half of the students we studied had confident profiles. This meant students reported average-to-high levels on the five confidence indicators.

Importantly, their levels within these confidence indicators were similar to or higher than averages found among students from medium-socioeconomic or high-socioeconomic backgrounds in a broader sample as part of our wider research.

These findings suggest there is a significant share of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who are thriving in terms of their academic confidence.

Our findings also showed students in confident profiles had high levels of academic achievement.

The remaining half of students had low-confidence profiles. These students had lower academic achievement than the confident students.

What types of teaching support work?

We also wanted to see what types of teaching support help students feel confident. So, via the survey, we looked at whether students received certain types of teaching support. Namely:

1. emotional support or students thinking their teacher is interested and invested in their learning and academic progress

2. instructional relevance or students thinking academic content and tasks are meaningful

3. organization and clarity or students being taught in clearly organized lessons

4. feedback/feedforward or students thinking their teacher provides clear directions and useful feedback

5. classroom management or students being taught in classrooms with clear rules and expectations.

Our research found all five factors were significantly linked to a student being classified in the confident profiles (rather than the low-confidence profiles). But some types of teaching support seemed to be more important than others.

In particular, "classroom management," "instructional relevance" and "[emotional support](#)" appeared to play a particular role. This means students who knew what was expected of them in class, saw their lessons as important and felt their teachers cared about them were more academically confident than those who did not feel or know these things.

For example, students reporting high levels of [classroom management](#) were up to five times more likely to be in the confident profiles than the low-confidence profiles.

What does this mean for teachers and schools?

The findings are important because they show large numbers of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are confident. And they suggest teaching support plays an important role in this.

While there are many factors that impact academic development among students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (and many of these are beyond their own control, or that of their school or household), our findings provide some insight into how to help.

Previous [research](#), as well as [new resources developed as part of our work](#), suggest some specific approaches for teachers. These include:

- breaking lesson activities into bite-sized chunks, so students get a sense of accomplishment, competence and motivation to keep going
- having "debrief time," when teachers talk with the class after an assignment is handed back to manage any negative emotions
- teachers making sure they spend time and resources on all students
- clearly explaining why a task is important and meaningful
- clearly explaining why behavioral expectations are important.

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