Early Adolescents’ Learning Behaviors in Group Situations: The Impact of Social Goals and Group Composition
Paige E. Ramsdell & Jennifer Henderlong Corpus
Reed College

Abstract
Developmental shifts in early adolescence include decreases in motivation along with increases in peer influence. The present study examined links between these social and academic domains by investigating how the social goals of early adolescents influence their reactions to hypothetical group learning situations. Social intimacy goals led to more positive learning behaviors regardless of group composition, while social status goals led to more negative learning behaviors when scenarios described working with popular students, but not with friends.

Introduction
Early adolescence brings with it shifts in the importance of both peer relationships and academic achievement (Buhmester, 1996; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). But, how do early adolescents’ social lives relate to their academic behaviors in the classroom?

One promising approach is to focus on adolescents’ social goals, as Ryan, Hicks, and Midgley (1997) have done in their investigation of early adolescents’ help-seeking behaviors.

Ryan et al. (1997) found that students with social intimacy goals sought academic help when needed, but that students with social status goals tended to avoid seeking help even when it was needed.

The present study investigated how social goals would influence learning behavior in other classroom situations, such as group projects or class presentations.

Method
Participants: 70 6th and 7th-grade students (43 girls, 27 boys).
Procedure: Participants first completed questionnaires assessing social status and social intimacy goals (see Ryan et al., 1997):
• It’s important to me to form one or two really close friendships at school. (Intimacy Goal)
• It’s important to me that I am accepted by the other students at school. (Status Goal)

Next, participants were presented with two hypothetical scenarios involving group work with (1) popular students and (2) friends:
Imagine that your class is doing group work on a science project. You are working in a group with a bunch of popular kids who you don’t know very well. I would avoid working with the group on the project.

Following each of the two scenarios, they were asked to predict the extent to which they would demonstrate a number of both positive (involvement, intrinsic motivation) and negative (avoidance, worry) learning behaviors. For example:

Results
Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that social intimacy goals, but not social status goals, predicted self-reported positive learning behaviors regardless of the hypothetical situation was with popular peers or friends (see Table).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Behaviors</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Popular Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status Goals</td>
<td>β .06</td>
<td>-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy Goals</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Behaviors</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Popular Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status Goals</td>
<td>β .11</td>
<td>.34**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy Goals</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions
Students with higher status goals appear to be so focused on the social aspects of learning situations with popular peers that they are consumed by anxiety and worry.

Social intimacy goals predicted more positive behaviors in the group learning situation regardless of group composition, while social status goals produced more negative behaviors in the group learning situation only when the other members of the group were popular peers.

The positive behaviors predicted by social intimacy goals speak to the potential of utilizing an intimacy goal approach to promote better classroom functioning.

References

Presented at the 2005 biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development in Atlanta, GA. Please direct correspondence to Paige Ramsdell at ramsdell@reed.edu, or to Jennifer Henderlong Corpus, Department of Psychology, Reed College, 319 S.W. Waverly Blvd, Portland OR 97202. Email: jhenderlong@reed.edu.