

# Studying why pupils get the giggles is no laughing matter

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Teachers have long been baffled about why some classes experience problems ranging from relentless low-level disruption to outbreaks of hysteria or insurrection, while others are a joy to teach.

Now academics are conducting research into the issue at two schools as part of a three-year experiment into social and emotional contagion.

Pupils will undergo brain scans, be observed in the classroom and interviewed as part of the project led by academics at the University of Reading.

Emotional contagion in the workplace has been researched by academics, who found that people could "catch" colleagues' feelings, with a ripple effect spreading out from managers' emotional states and attitudes.

Teenagers are thought to be particularly susceptible to their peers' emotions, whether getting the giggles, having fainting fits, competing academically or developing eating disorders.

Queen Anne's School, an independent day and boarding school for girls in Berkshire, is at the vanguard of neuroscience with its Brain Can Do programme. This has brought together researchers, teachers and experts in other fields to study how different factors, such as music, can influence learning.

Julia Harrington, the head teacher, said: "We want to learn how the brain works in adolescents. Some areas of the brain keep track of other people and their emotions and thoughts — we are a girls' school and we know girls are particularly good at that. Performing

well is about motivation. A lack of motivation is one of the things that leads to underperformance, unhappiness and disappointment. So it will be interesting to know how we motivate teenagers' brains in a social group."

Mrs Harrington said that working with academics at Reading meant that the school would have access to behavioural and neuro-imaging techniques, including MRI scans.

She said: "They will collect data over a three-year period so will focus on junior pupils from Year 7, covering critical points when their brains are really subject to emotional contagion."

She added that the dynamics of influence in children's peer groups were fascinating and that it was not necessarily the "strong characters" in the classroom that caused emotional contagion.

"It could be the person who is sitting there quietly but somehow influencing the group," she said. "Sometimes you deal with the wrong person. Asking the right questions is critical. Teachers want to be able to spot the real culprit when the emotional contagion is negative."

Researchers will also visit Westminster City School, a state boys' school.

Kou Murayama, the lead researcher, from the department of psychology at Reading, has previously investigated how overbearing parents can damage teenagers' results.

"How social factors such as teachers, parents and peers influence students has not been well investigated," he said. "We think emotional contagion is one of the important mechanisms. If this is the case, this has important implications for educational practice."

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