



The effect of classroom structure on verbal and physical aggression among peers: A short-term longitudinal study

Evelyn M. Bergsmann^{a,*}, Rens Van De Schoot^b, Barbara Schober^a,
Monika Finsterwald^a, Christiane Spiel^a

^a University of Vienna, Faculty of Psychology, Department of Applied Psychology: Work, Education, Economy, Universitaetsstrasse 7, A-1010 Vienna, Austria

^b University of Utrecht, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Methodology and Statistics, PO Box 80140, 3508 TC Utrecht, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Teachers promote student learning and well-being in school by establishing a supportive classroom structure. The term *classroom structure* refers to how teachers design tasks, maintain authority, and evaluate student achievement. Although empirical studies have shown the relation of classroom structure to student motivation, achievement, and well-being, no prior investigations have examined the influence of classroom structure on aggression among peers. The present study examined whether a supportive classroom structure has an impact on verbal and physical aggression. At two points in time, data were collected from 1680 students in Grades 5 to 7 using self-report questionnaires. The results of structural equation modeling revealed that a supportive classroom structure at Time 1 was associated with less perpetrated verbal aggression at Time 2, 9 months later. This finding has practical relevance for teacher training as well as for aggression prevention and intervention among children.

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1. Introduction

As teachers play a key role in promoting academic learning in students, teacher effectiveness (Cartel, Gayle, & Preiss, 2006; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006; Wayne & Youngs, 2003) and quality of teaching (Emmer & Stough, 2001; Van de Grift, 2007) are often discussed as relevant factors with respect to the academic functioning of students. A prominent concept in the context of teaching quality is Ames's (1992) classroom structure. A large body of literature has documented the impact of classroom structure on student well-being, motivation, and achievement (e.g., for an overview see Urdan & Turner, 2005). Thus, it appears classroom structure influences students in a holistic way.

However, we do not know if classroom structure also has an effect on social relationships and especially on aggression among students. Some underlying mechanisms as well as empirical evidence of related teaching-quality-constructs argue for this effect (Brock, Nishida, Chiong, Grimm, & Rimm-Kaufmann, 2008; Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999; Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Rimm-Kaufmann & Chiu, 2007). Hence, it was the intention of the present longitudinal study to gain knowledge on whether the classroom structure provided by teachers influences verbal and physical aggression among peers.

* Corresponding author at: University of Vienna, Faculty of Psychology, Department of Applied Psychology: Work, Education, Economy, Universitaetsstrasse 7, Room B0614, A-1010 Vienna, Austria. Tel.: +43 1 4277 47316; fax: +43 1 4277 9473.

E-mail addresses: evelyn.bergsmann@univie.ac.at (E.M. Bergsmann), A.G.J.vandeSchoot@uu.nl (R. Van De Schoot), barbara.schober@univie.ac.at (B. Schober), christiane.spiel@univie.ac.at (C. Spiel).

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1.1. Classroom structure

Classroom structure is a concept within the context of teaching quality. However, there is no consensus on a single definition of what constitutes teaching quality. In fact, different dimensions are used to describe teaching quality. Van de Grift (2007) summarized the current literature and described teaching quality as high if the teacher provides efficient classroom management (see also Roland & Galloway, 2002), a safe and stimulating learning climate (see also Ames, 1992; Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2007; Steuer, Rosentritt-Brunn, & Dresel, *in press*), clear instruction (see also Ames, 1992; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008), the explicit implementation of learning strategies (see also Ames, 1992; Boekarts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2000), and adaptation to differences between students (see also Ames, 1992; Houtveen & Van de Grift, 2001; Ziegler & Stoeger, 2004) and if the teacher fosters students' involvement (see also Newmann, 1992). Whereas many studies focused on only one dimension when examining teaching quality, the concept of classroom structure addresses the majority of the dimensions. Furthermore, Ames (1992) described classroom structure not as an abstract concept but rather as the concrete actions of teachers; this perspective is required to assess teaching quality and to formulate concrete, practical implications for teachers. Many studies that have referred to Ames's concept have demonstrated a positive impact on different aspects of student functioning (e.g., see Midgley et al., 2000). Therefore, in the following, we draw on Ames's (1992) classroom structure.

Ames (1992) specified three structural dimensions in describing high teaching quality. These dimensions include task, authority, and evaluation/recognition. Academic tasks should incorporate a structure that challenges learning, a feature that teachers can accomplish by formulating tasks as specific short-term goals. In doing so, teachers should ensure that students are involved in defining goals that can be adapted to the students' levels of proficiency. Furthermore, task structures should enhance meta-cognitive learning strategies among students, and teachers should provide students with tasks that encourage the students to explore different ways of learning and to think about their learning processes. Authority structure in the classroom refers to the extent to which a teacher supports and encourages student participation in the decision-making process. During the decision-making process, teachers should not leave their students alone, but rather they should make decisions together with their students. Hence, student responsibility should be accompanied by opportunities for students to develop self-management. Evaluation and recognition should be practiced simultaneously. Recognition implies that teachers recognize and appreciate improvement in their students. Evaluation means teachers provide students with feedback on their improvement and that teachers honor progress in their students. However, this feedback should also incorporate instruction on how to enhance competencies if shortcomings have been identified.

If the three structural dimensions (i.e. task, authority, and evaluation) are considered in teaching as Ames (1992) recommends, then they are supportive of the students. The three structural dimension are not independent from one another; instead, they interact (Lüftenegger, Van de Schoot, Schober, Finsterwald, & Spiel, *submitted for publication*; Schunk et al., 2008). It is assumed that, together, they create a mastery goal structure in the classroom (e.g., see Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Lüftenegger et al., *submitted for publication*; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006), which implies that all three dimensions should be considered simultaneously.

Midgley et al. (2000) adopted Ames's approach and incorporated it in their achievement goal theory (Elliot, 2005). According to the achievement goal theory, students learn because they want to understand new things (personal mastery goal orientation), because they want others to view them as good students (personal performance goal orientation), or both. However, Midgley et al. (2000) assumed that teachers who act on Ames's (1992) classroom structure dimensions not only evoke personal mastery goal orientation in individual students but also create a mastery goal structure in the classroom. This classroom mastery goal structure is defined by the "students' perception that the purpose of engaging in academic work in the classroom is to develop competence" (Midgley et al., 2000, p. 17).

It has been shown that classroom mastery goal structure has a positive impact on student motivation and, more specifically, on personal mastery goal orientation as well as on academic achievement (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Lau & Nie, 2008; Lüftenegger et al., *submitted for publication*; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Urdan, 2004; for an overview see Urdan & Turner, 2005). Furthermore, classroom mastery goal structure is associated with positive affect (Anderman, 1999), psychological well-being (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999), and the development of positive coping strategies with respect to stressful events in school (Kaplan & Midgley, 1999).

Student motivation and well-being are important aspects in the learning context (Pekrun & Stephens, 2012; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Roeser, Van de Wolf, & Strobel, 2001; Schunk et al., 2008). However, social relationships are also associated with academic learning (Bierhoff, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978; Wentzel, 2005). More specifically, students involved in aggressive situations, as both perpetrator and victim, were found to have academic problems (Bergsmann, Finsterwald, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2011; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Hence, teaching strategies that reduce aggressive behavior among students could improve academic learning in the classroom. However, there are no extant studies that examine the influence of Ames's (1992) classroom structure on aggression. Therefore, we examined these influences in this study.

1.2. Aggression

"Aggression is any behavior directed toward another individual that is carried out with the proximate (immediate) intent to cause harm" (Anderson & Bushman, 2002, p. 28). In the context of school, a distinction is often made between overt (or direct) aggression and relational (or indirect) aggression (e.g., Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Little, Jones, Henrich, & Hawley, 2003). Overt aggression incorporates verbal and physical aggression (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2001; Solberg &

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