

Middle school student perceptions of school climate: Examining protective functions on subsequent adjustment problems[☆]

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Abstract

The present study examined the roles of student perceptions of four aspects of school climate (friction, cohesion, competition among students, and satisfaction with classes) as moderators of the relations between effortful control and subsequent conduct problems and depressive symptoms. Participants were 488 10-to-14-year old students involved in two waves, with one year between each wave, of a study. Hierarchical regression analyses indicated that high levels of perceived friction predicted more subsequent conduct problems and depressive symptoms, even after baseline levels of these problems were partialled out. Low levels of effortful control also elevated risk for subsequent conduct problems. However, perceptions of the school as high in cohesion offset the risk associated with low levels of effortful control. Perceived satisfaction with classes also offset this risk, but only for females. Contrary to expectations, student perceptions of school climate did not interact with effortful control to predict subsequent depressive symptoms.

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Despite the amount of time middle school students spend in the school context, relatively little research has examined the role of the school's climate on early adolescent

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emotional and behavioral adjustment. School climate is a complex, multidimensional construct encompassing the atmosphere, culture, values, resources, and social networks of a school (Anderson, 1982; Fraser, 1989). School climate includes organizational, instructional, and interpersonal dimensions (see Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979; Fraser, 1989; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Although the concept is somewhat elusive and has been assessed in a number of different ways (see Anderson, 1982), most researchers agree that student personal experiences of the school climate mediate actual school climate effects (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Loukas & Robinson, 2004; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Roeser et al., 2000). From this perspective, it is individual perceptions of the school climate that contribute to middle school student outcomes.

A substantial body of research documents the role of perceived school climate in student achievement (see McEvoy & Welker, 2000). In addition to how well early adolescents perform academically, student perceptions of the school's climate may contribute to how they form positive peer relationships, feel positive about themselves, and negotiate the transitions characteristic of early adolescence (Roeser et al., 2000). Unfortunately, the changing needs of the early adolescent are not necessarily met by their middle schools (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Loukas & Robinson, 2004; Roeser et al., 2000). For instance, although needs for strong interpersonal relationships intensify during this developmental period, middle school classrooms tend to be impersonal and compartmentalized (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). In contrast to elementary schools, middle schools are more formal and impersonal (Midgley & Edelin, 1998). Middle schools also tend to be ability focused (Midgley & Edelin, 1998) and to promote social comparison (Roeser et al., 1998, 2000) at a point in development marked by heightened levels of self-consciousness.

According to Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Midgley & Edelin, 1998; Roeser et al., 1998, 2000), the mismatches between individual needs and their learning environments may lead students to feel incompetent, devalue school, and develop emotional or behavioral problems. Despite the mismatches, however, most early adolescents do not develop emotional or behavioral problems. Even students at elevated risk for maladjustment and for whom such developmental mismatches tend to be the most problematic show considerable variability in outcome (see Gutman & Midgley, 2000). From a developmental contextual perspective, the variability in adolescent outcomes may be explained by the interaction between contextual factors and adolescent individual differences (Lerner & Castellino, 2002). Because proponents of this perspective view individuals as embedded within multiple developmental contexts, they propose that adolescent outcomes cannot be fully explained by the independent or additive effects of either individual differences (e.g., temperament) or contextual factors (e.g., school climate). Rather individual differences and contextual factors are viewed as being multiplicative or interactive in nature (Lerner, 2002). From this perspective, it is important to examine how contextual factors, such as adolescent perceptions of school climate, moderate or modify the influences of individual differences on adolescent outcomes.

A moderator variable may act as a vulnerability factor, elevating risk for negative outcomes, or as a protective factor, buffering the impact of risk factors on adolescent outcomes (see Luthar, Cichetti, & Becker, 2000). Limited evidence indicates that a perceived good quality school climate may act as a protective factor, moderating the impact

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