



Mitigating the effect of family poverty on academic and behavioral outcomes: The role of school climate in middle and high school

Laura M. Hopson ^{a,*}, Eunju Lee ^{b,1}

^a University at Albany, School of Social Welfare, 135 Western Avenue, Richardson Hall, Room 207, Albany, NY 12222, United States

^b University at Albany, School of Social Welfare, 135 Western Avenue, Richardson Hall, Albany, NY 12222, United States

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ABSTRACT

The persistent achievement gap between students from poor families and their peers calls for research that examines risk factors associated with poverty and strategies for promoting resilience. Research demonstrates the impact of school climate on behavior and academic achievement, especially in high-poverty schools. The present study examines associations between family poverty, social supports, students' perceptions of school climate, behavior, and grades. Poverty is associated with poor grades and behavior, while positive perceptions of school climate are associated with positive grades and behavior. Perceptions of school climate moderate the association between poverty and behavior, such that students from poor families who perceive a positive school climate exhibit similar behaviors to their peers from higher income families. Implications for practice, policy, and research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A persistent achievement gap continues to place students from poor families at disproportionately high risk for dropout. The dropout rate among these students is ten times the rate among students from higher income families (Cataldi, Laird, & Kewal Ramani, 2009). They experience higher rates of problem behavior in school and academic difficulty (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Raver, Gershoff, & Aber, 2007). Specifically, students who participate in the free and reduced price lunch program are likely to perform poorly in reading and math (Okpala, Smith, Jones, & Ellis, 2000), receive low scores on standardized tests (Caldas & Bankston, 1997), and report low overall GPA (Malecki & Demaray, 2006). The proposed explanations for this disparity include stressors that students experience in their homes, schools, and communities that result from a lack of resources (Berliner, 2006; Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004).

The research literature provides evidence that social supports for students can moderate the impact of poverty and its associated stressors. Increasingly, research points to characteristics of the school environment as critical for learning and healthy development. School climates characterized by supportive relationships, emotional and physical safety, and shared goals for learning are associated with school connectedness and academic success (Cohen & Geier, 2010). A positive school climate may be especially important for students living in poverty (Eccles et al., 1993). The focus of this paper is to

examine whether perceptions of school climate moderate the effects of family poverty on grades and behavior.

1.1. Risk and resilience from an ecological perspective

Theoretical models of risk and resilience provide a useful framework for understanding why school climate may have a disproportionately strong effect on students from poor families. According to these models, youth outcomes are influenced by the accumulation of risk and protective factors. Protective factors may operate as compensatory factors or moderators of risk factors in predicting outcomes. Compensatory models of risk and resilience propose that protective factors increase the likelihood of positive outcomes independently and compensate for the effect of risk factors (Masten et al., 1988). Interactive models propose that protective factors are moderators, or factors that change the intensity of the effect of risk factors (Fraser et al., 2004; Rutter, 2006).

According to ecological theory, risk and protective factors operate within different ecological domains, including the peer group, family, school, and neighborhood to influence development (Bowen, Rose, Powers, & Glennie, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Richman, Bowen, & Wooley, 2004). Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that proximal processes, or the interactions between individuals and others within their immediate environment, have the most direct impact on development. In a school setting, these proximal processes would include students' interactions with peers and adults within the school.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 518 591 8787.

E-mail address: lhopsn@uamail.albany.edu (L.M. Hopson).

¹ Tel.: +1 518 442 5773.

1.1.1. Family poverty, social support, and risk for academic failure

The negative behavioral and academic outcomes associated with poverty are likely due to multiple stressors that result from a lack of resources (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010). The stressors that students from poor families face in their homes and communities may accumulate over time, compounding the likelihood of negative outcomes (Garmezy, 1993). Research examining risk factors for academic failure reveals that students living in poverty face stressors at multiple ecological levels, including the family system, the school environment, and neighborhood (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010; Fraser et al., 2004). The stressors associated with economic hardship can result in fewer social supports in students' homes, neighborhoods, and schools. For example, increased stress on economically disadvantaged parents results in fewer positive parenting behaviors and less investment in parenting (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2006).

Similarly, the disorganization and safety problems that often come with living in a low income neighborhood create a stressful environment in which there are too few resources and positive role models, resulting in lower rates of academic achievement and high school graduation (Fraser et al., 2004). Too often, these neighborhoods are plagued by crime and violence that compromise the safety and wellbeing of students and teachers (Berliner, 2010). Students living in these communities are unlikely to find the social supports that students can access in higher income communities. Because research indicates that poor families tend to have fewer social supports across ecological domains, the current study includes measures of social support in the analysis examining the relationship between poverty and academic outcomes.

Research points unequivocally to the relationship between poverty and poor academic performance. However, schools cannot be held responsible for the many stressors in low income households and communities that compromise learning. Risk factors in students' families and neighborhoods, as well as medical problems, strongly influence achievement. Importantly, small reductions in family poverty improve academic performance and behavior in school. Thus, the most powerful interventions are likely to be policies that reduce family poverty (Berliner, 2010). However, schools can use data-informed strategies for assessing students' needs and creating a responsive environment that may mitigate some of the risk factors associated with poverty.

1.1.2. Resilience and the importance of social context

Resilience is defined as an ability to experience adversity and avoid negative outcomes, such as mental health disorders, substance abuse, school dropout, and delinquency (Richman et al., 2004). However, resilience is not merely an intrinsic ability to perform well in adverse circumstances. The combination of risk factors, the degree of risk, and the context of risk exposure interact to create the conditions for resilience (Rutter, 2006).

While resilience relates to the combination of risk and protective factors and individual experiences, it goes beyond examining risk and protective factors alone. The concept of resilience also encompasses the social context in which those events occur (Rutter, 2006). Thus, in addition to understanding the risk and protective factors experienced by children, it is important to examine the social processes in which children are engaged when they are exposed to risk. The importance of the social context helps to explain why resilience is associated with communication skills, relationship skills, and positive relationships with caring adults (Werner, 1995, 2004). It is the importance of the social context that points to school climate as the condition for resilience in a school setting.

1.2. School climate

The National School Climate Council defines school climate as the "quality and character of school life". It refers to the psychological

impact of the organizational environment on children and adults within the school. It encompasses norms, goals, values, relationships, organizational structure, and methods of teaching and learning (Cohen & Geier, 2010). These school characteristics shape the experience of all individuals within the school and determine whether they feel supported, valued, respected, and safe.

Although researchers present competing ideas about the most important dimensions of school climate, most agree that climate is determined by perceptions of safety, relationships within the school, goals related to teaching and learning, and the learning environment, which encompasses school structure and feelings of connectedness to school (Cohen & Geier, 2010). Research in the area of positive youth development parallels school climate research in its emphasis on school connectedness. Students' feelings of being part of the school community and cared for by the members of that community create the conditions for healthy development and avoidance of risk behavior (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002).

Students' perceptions of climate are defined by their relationships with others at school. Positive climates are characterized by supportive relationships, such that students and school personnel feel cared for as individuals. When individuals within a school feel connected to each other, students experience positive academic, health, and behavioral outcomes (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Ruus et al., 2007; Whitlock, 2006). The quality of a school's climate is characterized by four levels of interactions: 1) interactions among students, 2) interactions between school personnel and students, 3) interactions among school personnel, and 4) interactions between the school, families, and community (Richman et al., 2004).

A growing body of research has examined interactions among students as important in shaping their perceptions of school climate (Loukas & Robinson, 2004). Much of this research has focused on the effects of bullying on school climate and academic outcomes (Cohen, 2006). Interactions among school personnel are also important, as students perform better in schools in which staff collaborate in decision making, share a common mission, and trust each other (Bowen, Rose, & Ware, 2006; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Harris & Hopkins, 2000; Hofman, Hofman, & Guldemong, 2001; Keys, Sharp, Greene, & Grayson, 2003; Lee & Smith, 1993). Similarly, positive interactions between staff members and students' families are associated with family involvement in school, school engagement, and academic achievement (Fraser et al., 2004).

Among the four levels of interactions that define a school's climate, perhaps the most important and extensively studied are interactions between students and school personnel. Students perform better in schools in which there is a positive relationship between students and school staff members, especially teachers. Positive student-teacher relationships are associated with academic achievement (Niebuhr & Niebuhr, 1999; Waxman, Anderson, Huang, & Weinstein, 1997). Middle and high school students who report receiving support from teachers are engaged in school and avoid problem behaviors, such as truancy, arguing with teachers, and fighting with students (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Powers, Bowen, & Rose, 2005; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). When school personnel demonstrate respect for students and seek their input in developing rules and policies, students experience fewer risk behaviors, such as substance use and violence (Blum et al., 2002; Erickson, Mattaini, & McGuire, 2004; Osterman, 2000).

1.2.1. School climate in high poverty schools

A positive climate seems to have the strongest positive impact on student outcomes in high poverty schools (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995). Schools with large numbers of students from poor families are most successful in meeting learning objectives when they have school climates characterized by collegiality, collaboration, shared decision-making, positive attitudes, high quality

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