



Measurement and structural relations of an authoritative school climate model: A multi-level latent variable investigation☆

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ABSTRACT

This study tested a conceptual model of school climate in which two key elements of an authoritative school, structure and support variables, are associated with student engagement in school and lower levels of peer aggression. Multilevel multivariate structural modeling was conducted in a statewide sample of 48,027 students in 323 public high schools who completed the Authoritative School Climate Survey. As hypothesized, two measures of structure (Disciplinary Structure and Academic Expectations) and two measures of support (Respect for Students and Willingness to Seek Help) were associated with higher student engagement (Affective Engagement and Cognitive Engagement) and lower peer aggression (Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying) on both student and school levels of analysis, controlling for the effects of school demographics (school size, percentage of minority students, and percentage of low income students). These results support the extension of authoritative school climate model to high school and guide further research on the conditions for a positive school climate.

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School climate is broadly defined as the “quality and character of school life” and is “based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009 p. 182). Many studies have identified a positive school climate as an important condition for favorable student outcomes ranging from academic achievement to healthy socio-emotional development (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Espelage, Low, & Jimerson, 2014; Kidiger, Araya, Donovan, & Gunnell, 2012; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). For example, Barile et al. (2012) found that favorable student-teacher relationships were associated with higher academic achievement and lower dropout rates. A study of a nationally representative sample of secondary schools found that a school climate characterized by clear and fair school rules had less delinquent behavior and student victimization (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005). Another study found that a positive school climate was associated with greater teacher satisfaction and teaching efficacy (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012).

Based on this diverse body of research, there are numerous state and national initiatives to make positive school climate a guiding principle of school improvement (Dary & Pickeral, 2013; Piscatelli & Lee, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In its “Guiding Principles” resource guide, the U.S. Department of Education (2014) specifically urged schools to “engage in deliberate efforts to create positive school climates” (p. 5) as a means to engage all students in learning, prevent problem behaviors, and support

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struggling or at-risk students. High schools have been targeted for school climate improvement because of concern about the unfairness of school disciplinary practices and the associated risk of school failure and dropout (Morgan, Salomen, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014).

Several studies have found that a positive school climate is associated with successful implementation of prevention programs (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009; Low & Van Ryzin, 2014). Although there is general agreement with the theory that school climate influences student learning and behavior (Cohen et al., 2009), there is relatively little consensus on the key dimensions of school climate and how to measure them (American Institutes for Research, 2013; Hung, Luebbe, Flaspohler, 2014). The purpose of the present study is to investigate the authoritative school climate model as a framework for measuring and testing relations among key elements of school climate at the high school level.

1. Authoritative school climate model

The authoritative school climate model is derived from Baumrind's (1968) work on authoritative parenting which continues to guide a substantial body of child development research (Larzelere, Morris, & Harrist, 2013). This work identified two dimensions of parenting: one dimension concerned with the parent's high expectations and demands for the child and the other concerned with how warm and supportive the parent is toward the child. Research has found that parents are most effective when they apply a combination of strict discipline and emotional support for their children, and are less effective when they are highly structured and demanding but not supportive (authoritarian), emotionally supportive but lacking in structure (permissive), or lacking in both structure and support (disengaged or neglectful).

The authoritative school climate model presents a promising theoretical framework for conceptualizing a positive school climate (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Gregory et al., 2010; Konold et al., 2014). According to this model, two key dimensions of school climate are structure and support, which are similar, but not equivalent, to the corresponding dimensions of high expectations and supportiveness in the parenting literature. Two components of structure or high expectations have been used in the literature. Some studies have measured high expectations in the form of disciplinary structure, which refers to strict but fair enforcement of school rules (e.g., Gregory et al., 2010; Konold et al., 2014), while other studies have included the academic expectations or academic press that teachers demand of their students as another aspect of a structured or demanding school (Gill, Ashton, & Algina, 2004; Pellerin, 2005; Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011). Studies have more consistently measured support (sometimes called responsiveness) as the degree to which students perceive their teachers to be supportive, respectful, and willing to help them.

It has been theorized that both structure and support dimensions are important because students are more willing to comply with the expectations of school authorities when they feel supported and respected by them (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). Measures of structure and support are found on other school climate surveys with various scale names (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011; Bradshaw, Waasdrop, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014; Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003), but the authoritative model places special emphasis on these domains as integrally related to overall school climate and successful student outcomes. Other models of school climate do not make specific claims for the relations among their school climate scales.

1.1. Initial studies of authoritative school climate

Three studies operationalized an authoritative school climate as characterized by independent variables of high demandingness in the form of high academic expectations for students, and high responsiveness, which was defined by student perceptions that their teachers were supportive and interested in their students. These studies used pre-existing national databases with student and/or administrator survey questions that subsequently could be used to construct their measures of school climate. Because these databases were not constructed to measure authoritative school climate, in each study the authors constructed indicators of authoritative school climate qualities using available survey items or scales. A study using National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data tested whether an authoritative school climate was associated with mathematics achievement, internal control, and student engagement (Gill, Ashton, & Algina, 2004). Gill et al. (2004) measured authoritative qualities they termed "responsiveness" and "demandingness" with selected student and principal survey items that were factor analyzed and labeled "Student Perceived School Responsiveness," "Principal Perceived School Responsiveness," and "Principal Perceived School Demandingness." Of most relevance to the present study, a hierarchical multilevel modeling analysis found that Students' Perceived Responsiveness was significantly related to a three-item student-report measure of engagement in learning ($\beta = .35$).

Pellerin (2005) also used NELS survey data and constructed measures of responsiveness, academic demandingness, and disciplinary demandingness using a combination of administrator (principal) and student survey items. Pellerin (2005) constructed overall measures of responsiveness and demandingness for each school and classified schools into authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and indifferent categories. A series of ordinary least regression analyses found that authoritative schools had less truancy and fewer dropouts than other schools. This study did not conduct multilevel analyses or provide information to distinguish the relative contributions of authoritative school qualities.

Lee (2012) used student survey data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for U.S. schools. Student survey items measured independent variables of "Teacher-student Relationship" and "Academic Press," and dependent variables of "Behavioral Engagement," "Emotional Engagement," and "Academic Performance." A multilevel analysis at student and school levels found that a supportive teacher-student relationship was associated with all three student outcomes (specifically, a one-unit increase in teacher-student relationship was associated with a 0.33 unit increase in behavioral engagement, 0.29 increase in emotional engagement, and 10.96-unit increase in reading performance). Academic press was associated with behavioral engagement

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